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ABSTRACT

This document reports the results of a nationwide survey of more than 1,700 households conducted by the National Commission on Children. Children between the ages of 10 and 17 and their parents were interviewed concerning the quality of their family life and the nature of their relationships with each other and with institutions that affect families. Results indicated that: (1) most parents reported close relationships with their children; (2) most children reported satisfaction with their family life; (3) most parents reported considerable stress related to factors outside the family, such as economic pressures; (4) single parents and children living apart from one or both parents reported substantial stress related to the absence of a parent; (5) custodial parents reported serious economic concerns; and (6) minority families, poor families in general, and poor urban families in particular, reported more problems affecting children's well-being than did other families. Results indicated a need for increased adult guidance for adolescents experiencing peer pressure concerning high risk activities. Recommendations for strengthening families, ensuring economic security, supporting adolescents' transition to adulthood, and creating a moral climate for children are offered. Appendixes include an explanation of the survey methodology and a list of the members of the survey's technical advisory panel. (BC)

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SPEAKING OF KIDS

A National Survey of Children and Parents

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NATIONAL COMMISSION ON CHILDREN

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SPEAKING OF KIDS

A National Survey of Children and Parents

Report of the National Opinion Research Project

The National Commission on Children was established by Public Law 100-203 "to serve as a forum on behalf of the children of the nation." It is a bipartisan body whose 34 members were appointed by the President, the President *pro tempore* of the U.S. Senate, and the Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. As required, the Commission submitted a final report on June 24, 1991 to the President; to the Committee on Finance and the Committee on Labor and Human Resources of the Senate; and to the Committees on Ways and Means, Education and Labor, and Energy and Commerce of the House of Representatives.

NATIONAL COMMISSION ON CHILDREN

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Chairman's Preface

Earlier this year, the National Commission on Children released its final report, **Beyond Rhetoric: A New American Agenda for Children and Families.** Unanimously approved by a diverse, bipartisan body, this report offers a bold blueprint for a national policy to support America's children and their families. It was the product of two and a half years of arduous investigation, including field hearings, town meetings, site visits, forums, and focus groups in eleven communities across the country as well as an extensive review of relevant research and program experience. In addition, as a part of our study, we undertook a national opinion research project, surveying children, parents, and adults who are not currently raising children, in order to better understand public attitudes and perceptions about children and contemporary family life.

In this report, **Speaking of Kids: A National Survey of Children and Parents,** I am pleased to present the findings from two related surveys of American adults and children. They offer America and its leaders a riveting message of hope and urgency. I can think of no more compelling evidence of the need for this nation to direct its considerable energy, attention, and generosity toward its children and their families than the voices of its own people. Much of what is revealed in the pages of this report is cause for great celebration. The ability of strong, stable families and caring communities to nurture children who can grow into healthy, productive adults is clearly documented. Equally clear, however, is the vulnerability of those children whose families lack the emotional, spiritual, and material resources and support to do a good job of childrearing. As a nation we must do more and we must do better to capitalize on the great strengths of our families and communities, and we must take immediate steps to address the devastating conditions that threaten the health and well-being of so many of our young people.

The surveys that are the topic of this report were completed over a period of several months during 1990. In detailed telephone interviews with nationally representative sample of more than 1,700 parents and 900 children, we had the rare opportunity to hear directly from a broad cross-

section of American families about their daily lives, their joys and struggles, and their hopes and aspirations. In a companion face-to-face survey of more than 1,300 randomly-selected adults, some who are currently raising children and some who are not, we were able to explore public perceptions of the quality of family life and assess public concern about the well-being of American children today.

The adults and children who took part in the surveys were open and reflective. Most, it seems, regarded their involvement as an opportunity to express themselves on critical social issues and contribute to public understanding of some of the most fundamental concerns facing this nation. Despite the length of the telephone interviews (30 minutes for parents, 20 minutes for children), we achieved a remarkably high response rate (71 percent). If for any reason an interview had to be interrupted, most participants — parents and children alike — willingly scheduled time to complete it. We achieved a similarly high response rate for the face-to-face survey of the general adult population (74 percent).

What we learned from the surveys was often moving, occasionally surprising, and at times disturbing. The findings provided significant evidence to support the Commission's major conclusions: Most American children are happy and healthy, growing up in families that tend diligently to their needs. But at every age, among all races and income groups, and in communities nationwide, there are children and families whose lives are less easy or secure. Among families of all income levels, parents expressed dissatisfaction with the limited amount of time they have with their children. In some families, time pressures and other stresses leave parents too distracted or drained to provide the nurturing, structure, and support children need. Among some children, poverty makes their daily lives difficult and casts a forbidding shadow over their future prospects. While low-income parents were more likely to mention economic worries, many middle-income parents also expressed concern about their ability to make ends meet. Finally, for too many families, violent streets and unsafe neighborhoods strike fear in parents' hearts and place children at constant risk. These findings, along with the testimony of hundreds of parents and children who volunteered their feelings and concerns in the Commission's town meetings, hearings, forums, and focus groups, underscored the urgency of the Commission's message to the nation to act now to support and protect America's children and families.

In our final report, the National Commission on Children urged Americans to take immediate steps to adopt a comprehensive, national policy for children and families. Our recommendations are based on a vision of what America can and should be: a nation where every family is strong and stable; where no child is touched by poverty and avoidable illness; where every child enters school ready to learn and every school provides an excellent education; and where every child is prepared for the privileges and responsibilities of parenthood, citizenship, and employ-

ment. We see a nation that puts its children and their families first. To a great extent this vision grew out of our shared experiences as we travelled the country and what we learned from our surveys of parents and children. In particular, our recommendations for ensuring income security, strengthening and supporting families, and creating a moral climate for children were significantly influenced by the findings from our national opinion research project.

Without the generous support and contributions of many individuals, these surveys would not have been possible. On behalf of the members of the National Commission on Children, I want to gratefully acknowledge the extraordinary efforts of those who lent their considerable knowledge, skills, and emotional energy to this project. First and foremost, I want to express deep gratitude to all the adults and children who shared with us their personal thoughts and private concerns. They were generous with their time, and without them this project could not have been undertaken. Much of what we heard from them gave us great hope for America's future. It also gave us the strong resolve to do what is necessary to address the conditions that threaten a growing number of children and families and make their daily lives a difficult trial.

I am especially indebted to the members of the Technical Advisory Panel,[a] who helped develop the initial concept for the survey design, commented on successive drafts of the questionnaires, and reviewed the resulting data that we collected. Their intellectual contribution made this project unique for its ambitiousness and its methodological rigor. In particular, I want to thank Frank F. Furstenberg of the University of Pennsylvania for the time he spent in consultation with the members of the Commission and staff.

I want to extend our deepest appreciation to Kristin A. Moore of Child Trends, Inc. for her extraordinary work in designing the surveys and analyzing the resulting data. Her dedication, professional rigor, and unyielding attention to detail made these surveys a valuable resource for the Commission as well as for American scholars and decisionmakers. I also want to acknowledge the significant contributions other members of the Child Trends staff, especially Nicholas Zill and Ellen Wolpow Smith.

Under the able direction of Diane Colasanto, Princeton Survey Research Associates conducted the telephone surveys of parents and children. Diane's extensive experience as a survey researcher and her knowledge of child and family issues added immeasurably to the success of this project. We are grateful to her and all of the interviewers who diligently administered the surveys.

I also want to thank Tom Smith, Woody Carter, and Joan Law of NORC who were instrumental in shaping the Commission's survey of the general adult population. With their help, we were able to add a series of

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[a] See Appendix B for a list of members of the Technical Advisory Panel.

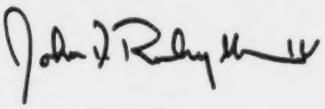
questions to the General Social Survey, which NORC administers, and thus reach a representative sample of adult Americans.

It is with heartfelt thanks that I also want to extend the Commission's great appreciation to our dedicated staff. Cheryl D. Hayes, the Commission's executive director, directed all aspects of our work over the two-and-a-half-year period and oversaw the design of the surveys, collection and analysis of the data, and preparation of this report. Carol Emig, our deputy director, managed the survey project on a day-to-day basis and drafted this report. Special thanks also go to Polly Dement, the Commission's communications director; administrative staff members Jeannine Atalay, Linda Wells, and Bertha Gaymon; research assistants Chase Haddix and Thomas Woods; and the young people who serve as interns. The dedication and extraordinary efforts of the entire staff contributed to the successful completion of the opinion research project.

Finally, I want to gratefully acknowledge the generous financial support of the Foundation for Child Development which helped make this project possible.

The initial survey results were reviewed by the National Commission on Children in July 1990 and February 1991. In the ensuing months, the major findings helped shape some of the themes and recommendations presented in the Commission's final report, and they are cited throughout that document. But the findings reported here and in the final report are only a portion of the information potentially available from the survey data. We hope and encourage others to pick up where we left off—to conduct their own analyses, and in so doing advance the nation's knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of its children and their families. For this reason, the Commission's survey data are now available in several public archives where they can be retrieved for further analysis by scholars and researchers.[b]

In our final report, the National Commission on Children called for a national effort by individuals, the private sector, and government at all levels to support children and strengthen their families. The public has responded enthusiastically to our call to action. In the months to come, I hope that release of these survey findings will add momentum to a growing movement on behalf of the nation's children. They deserve no less.



John D. Rockefeller IV
Chairman

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[b] See the Methodological Appendix for information on how to obtain data collected by the National Commission on Children.

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Exploring the Changes in American Family Life

The Changing American Family: A National Perspective

There is growing concern across the nation about the well-being of American children and their families. Though most American children grow up in loving homes with parents who tend to their physical and emotional needs, family life in general has undergone profound changes in recent decades. Major demographic, social, and economic shifts in U.S. society have contributed to changes in family structure, the economic security of families raising children, and the routines of daily life. These changes have provoked discussion and debate, leading even casual observers to raise questions about their impact on many of the nation's children.

In the United States today, more children than ever before grow up without the support and consistent presence of a father in their lives. At any given time, one-quarter of American children are living with just one parent, usually a divorced or never-married mother. For many of these children, their fathers' physical absence from the home has enormous emotional and financial consequences.

More families face financial difficulties or uncertainty today than 20 years ago. The costs of housing, transportation, education, and health care have risen steadily since the 1970s, consuming substantially more of a typical family's income than they did 20 years ago. The share of income paid in taxes by families with children has risen dramatically in the last 30 years. In contrast to earlier decades of increasing family prosperity, growth in real family income slowed considerably in the 1970s and 1980s.[1] One of every five children in the United States lives in a family whose income is below — often far below — the poverty level, making children the poorest of Americans. In many families, both fathers and mothers find it necessary to work long hours outside the home to support their families.

Social changes have also contributed to long hours worked by mothers and fathers. Mothers today — even mothers of young children — are more likely than not to be employed outside the home, for both economic and personal reasons. As more mothers and fathers work longer hours to support their families and advance their careers, parents and the public alike express concern about the amount of family time and attention children receive. Maintaining

the routines of family life — dinner together, family outings, and parental participation in their children's school and extracurricular activities — is often a challenge in the face of work demands and other time constraints. For many parents, time for their children has become more difficult to find.

These changes within families and the stresses they often engender are joined by changes in the larger society. For many families, close-knit communities and the ready support of nearby relatives and friends no longer exist. As families move in order to pursue employment and educational opportunities and older Americans move when they retire, the geographic distances between extended family members have increased. In many cases, work and other demands further isolate families within communities, leaving them little time or opportunity for neighborhood, civic, or community involvement.

In recent years, many communities across the nation have been rocked by violence perpetrated by adults and young people alike. Today, random attacks and drive-by shootings impose reigns of terror on some urban neighborhoods, with serious and often deadly consequences for children of all ages.

Vicious and predatory acts are an extreme manifestation of a cultural trend toward self-serving and even dehumanizing conduct. While the vast majority of Americans do not engage in violent or destructive behavior, many adults and children seem nevertheless to lack a strong moral compass. This is particularly harmful for children, who need guidance about their daily behavior and a strong set of values to help them establish appropriate goals for their lives. Some observers fault parents for allowing moral drift among young people. Others point to changing social mores and the negative or contradictory messages conveyed to children by popular culture, public policies, and the practices of major social institutions.

None of these changes in family life or in society is new. They are the subject of countless research reports, political debates, and kitchen table discussions. But continued discussion and analysis are critical because these changes have enormous implications for the nation's continued economic, political, and cultural vitality. Already we glimpse the social costs of allowing even a small proportion of children to grow up ill-prepared to meet the responsibilities of employment, citizenship, and parenthood.

The National Commission on Children's Surveys: A Closer Look at Family Life

Research and common sense tell us that for children to grow up healthy and whole, they need the constant love, careful nurturing, and secure environment provided by strong, stable families. But how strong are parent-child relationships in the midst of the changes recounted above? How much time do families spend together, and is it sufficient to meet children's needs and ease parents' minds? How do children and parents view the effects of maternal employment, single parenthood, divorce, and other contemporary trends on their own families? What worries parents most as they watch their children grow? What gives them the greatest satisfaction? How do children and parents feel about their neighborhoods, schools, and community organizations?

Countless analyses of national data and social trends have attempted to answer at least some of these questions. Individual parents and children across the country who met with the National Commission on Children during its two-year investigation were also quick to offer their thoughts and impressions. But perspectives differ, and anecdotal evidence often fails to capture the range of experi-

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ences and circumstances in the country. These limitations led the Commission to conduct a nationwide survey of more than 1,700 households, interviewing children age 10 to 17 and their parents, as well as parents of children from birth to age 10. (See Appendix A for a discussion of survey methodology.) The Commission wanted to hear directly from a nationally representative group of children and their parents about the nature and quality of their family life as well as their relationships with each other and with the major institutions that touch families — schools, the workplace, neighborhoods, and religious and civic organizations.

To establish a context in which to examine these issues, the Commission first undertook a brief survey of the general adult population to gauge their attitudes about how children are faring, how well parents are doing raising children, and the social influences that help or harm children. Among other questions, it asked adults their impressions of the job parents are doing raising children — for example, whether parents spend enough time with their children, and whether they generally know where their children are and what they are doing when away from home. This survey also explored Americans' views on whether the job of parenting is more difficult today than it used to be, whether parents have a difficult time making ends meet, and whether and how contemporary culture — specifically movies, television, and popular music — influences children. Finally, this first survey asked American adults if they think children today are better or worse off than children 10 years ago with respect to the supervision and discipline they receive, their moral or religious training, and the time they have with their children.

The Commission then designed a second survey to gather information directly from children age 10 to 17 and their parents, as well as from parents of younger children. This survey, more extensive than the first, provided the Commission with the opportunity to hear from a nationally representative group of children and parents about the nature of their family lives, their major fears and concerns, and the factors that support or work against strong, stable families. It asked parents to rate their overall relationship with their children, and it asked children to name the important adults in their lives. It also asked a series of questions about parental monitoring of children and parent-child activities. For example, the survey asked both parents and children whether parents generally know who their children are with and what they are doing when they are not home. It asked how often families eat dinner together, and how often parents read to younger children and help older children with their homework. This survey also asked parents and children about some of the major institutions in their lives, including:

- how they would rate their schools, child care arrangements, and neighborhoods;
- whether teachers and principals are doing a good job;
- whether there are safe places for children and young people to gather in their neighborhoods;
- whether religious institutions offer programs and activities for youth; and
- whether recreational, cultural, and other activities are easily available to children and teenagers.

Both children and parents were asked whether they felt they had enough time together, and how often parents miss events that their children consider important. Parents were asked about the extent of their involvement in their children's education, religious training, and other aspects of their lives. For example, how often do parents meet with a teacher, attend a school meeting, or help with a field trip or class project? Do parents and children attend religious services together, and if so, how often? Do parents teach a Sunday school class? Do they coach a child's team? The survey also asked children who live apart from a parent how often they see their absent parents.

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Finally, this second survey asked children and teenagers whether they could talk with their parents about major concerns — for example, dating, sex, problems with friends, moral or religious concerns, drug and alcohol use. It also asked whether children and teenagers would like to talk more with their parents about these issues. It probed the extent to which parents and children worry about children's personal safety (Will they be beaten up, attacked, molested — even shot?) and their future prospects (Will they become teenage parents? Will they finish high school? Will they be able to secure good jobs when they complete school?).

The survey also gathered background information about parents' marital and employment status, family income, race or ethnic background, and place of residence. This information allowed the Commission to analyze responses by family structure, income, race and ethnicity, and whether a family lives in an urban or nonurban community. Where significant, data are reported separately for these subpopulations. In some cases, for example, the responses of employed mothers are compared to responses from mothers who do not work outside the home. In other cases, the Commission examined children's responses based on whether a child lives with a single parent, with neither parent, with both of their biological or adoptive parents, or in a stepfamily.

An Overview of Survey Findings

The surveys yielded many reassuring results, some troubling findings, and several surprises. In particular, they called into question popular charges that most families are in disarray and most parents are failing to meet their childrearing responsibilities. Instead, the surveys offer an important reminder of the internal strengths that many families possess. Married and single parents alike reported close relationships with their children and appear to go to great lengths to give them the time and attention they need. Children, surveyed independently, confirmed their parents' reports, indicating considerable satisfaction with their family life. These close and enduring ties are important anchors for many families during times of adversity.

Still, parents reported considerable stress in their lives. Most attributed it more to external sources — work demands, peer pressures on children, damaging cultural messages, social isolation, economic pressures, unsafe streets and neighborhoods — than to strained relationships within families or parental disregard, with one notable exception. Never-married and divorced parents and children living apart from one or both parents reported substantial stress that appears to stem from the sustained absence of a parent or parents. Custodial parents reported serious economic concerns and time constraints, both of which affect their ability to meet their children's physical and emotional needs. Children were often painfully blunt in reporting the neglect and detachment of their absent parents.

The surveys also identified several other groups of children and families for whom life is difficult, sometimes extremely so. When the population of children and parents is analyzed separately by income, race, and geography, significant stresses and threats to children's well-being are found for particular subgroups. Minority families, poor families generally, and poor families living in large cities indicated a variety of problems and stresses that directly affected their children's safety and well-being.

Finally, the surveys highlighted the need for additional adult guidance and involvement in the lives of adolescents, a substantial proportion of whom are exposed to peers and friends engaged in high-risk activities that threaten their own and others' safety and well-being. Too often, the young people who appeared most in need of guidance and oversight also reported lower than average levels of parental involvement in their daily activities and less frequent communication about issues of concern to adolescents.

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America Speaks Out About Children and Families

Public Perceptions of Children, Parents, and Family Life

The Commission preceded its survey of parents and children with a brief survey of adult Americans — those raising children, those with adult children, and those who are childless — to measure public perceptions of contemporary family life. The findings from this survey revealed considerable pessimism about the state of the family and the plight of children. Overwhelming percentages of American adults, regardless of age, race, marital status, and whether they are raising children, believe that:

- it is harder to be a parent today than it used to be (88 percent);
- parents today are often uncertain about what is the right thing to do in raising their children (86 percent);
- parents often don't know where their children are or what they are doing (76 percent);
- parents today have a hard time making ends meet (87 percent); and
- parents today don't spend enough time with their children (81 percent).

More than half of American adults (55 percent) believe that parents today are not doing as good a job as their parents did. Interestingly, parents who are now raising children did not differ significantly from other adults in their responses to any of these items.

Americans also believe that children are worse off today in several aspects of their personal lives for which society normally holds parents responsible. More than half of Americans believe that, compared to 10 years ago, children today are worse off with respect to:

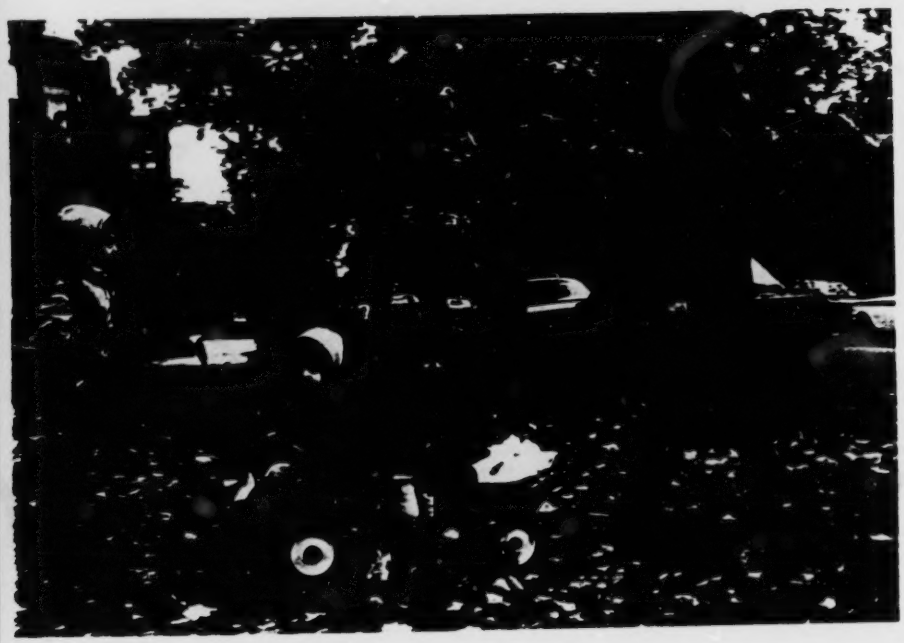
- their moral or religious training (53 percent);
- the supervision and discipline they receive from their parents (56 percent); and
- the time they have with their parents (57 percent).

A third of Americans believe that children today receive less love, care, and attention from their parents than did children a decade ago. Again, parents raising children did not differ significantly from other adults in their responses to these questions.

There appears to be some recognition by the public that external factors, often beyond the control of parents, affect children's health and well-being. Two-thirds of adults believe the safety of the neighborhoods in which families raise children is worse or much worse than 10 years ago. Seventy percent believe that when both parents work, children are more likely to get into trouble. Substantial numbers also believe that some aspects of popular culture are harmful to children. Just over half worry about the negative influence of rock music. About 40 percent of adults believe that movies and programs on commercial television have a negative effect on children; half believe the same about television advertising.

What Children and Parents Say About Themselves

A different and more complex story emerged when the Commission surveyed children and parents directly. When asked about their family lives, the majority of children and parents did not share the public's pessimism. While most parents acknowledged that economic stresses and time pressures impinge upon their family life, they also made it abundantly clear that their children still hold center stage in their lives and are most



parents' greatest source of satisfaction. Regardless of income or family structure, parents raising children overwhelmingly characterized their relationships with their children as "excellent" (65 percent) or "good" (32 percent) (see Figure 1). Roles and routines may well have changed within many families as they have adapted to social, economic, and demographic change, but parents report that they still devote considerable time and attention to their children.

Parent-Child Relationships: The Ties that Bind. While the survey findings revealed problems and areas of dissatisfaction, on the whole they sketched a picture of family life that for parents and children is close and satisfying. Families participate in a range of activities that are enjoyable and important to children's well-being, although more so when children are young than when they are teenagers. About 70 percent of all parents surveyed reported playing a game or sport with their children at least weekly (see Figure 2). Parents of younger children reported in overwhelming numbers that they read to their children at least weekly (86 percent). In 70 percent of households surveyed, families eat dinner together five or more nights a week.

The survey also revealed that most parents are fairly diligent in monitoring their children's activities. Almost every parent surveyed reported knowing "all or most" of their children's friends, as well as whom their children are with "all or most of the time." Eighty-eight percent believed that they know all or most of the time what their children are doing when they are not at home. Their children age 10 to 17 were asked the same questions about parental monitoring, and in a majority of cases, children's responses matched their parents. About a third of children, however, were less likely than their parents to believe that their parents knew all or most of the time who they were with and what they were doing when away from home.

Parents reported regular involvement with their children's schools, although this, too, seems somewhat more prevalent among parents of younger children than parents of teenagers. Eighty-three percent of parents report that they have talked to their child's teacher at least once in the last year. Seventy percent said that they have attended a PTA or other school meeting, and 80 percent have attended a play, concert, sporting event, or other activity at their children's school in the last year. Smaller percentages of parents indicated involvement in more time-consuming activities. More than half (57 percent) said that they have helped out with a special school project or a class trip, and 42 percent have worked with a youth group or club or coached a sports team. While these percentages are impressive, they also suggest that parental participation drops off for more demanding activities (see Figure 2).

Figure 1

Parents' Rating of Their Relationships with Their Children (Age 17 and Younger)

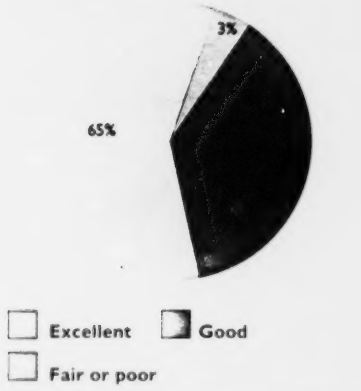
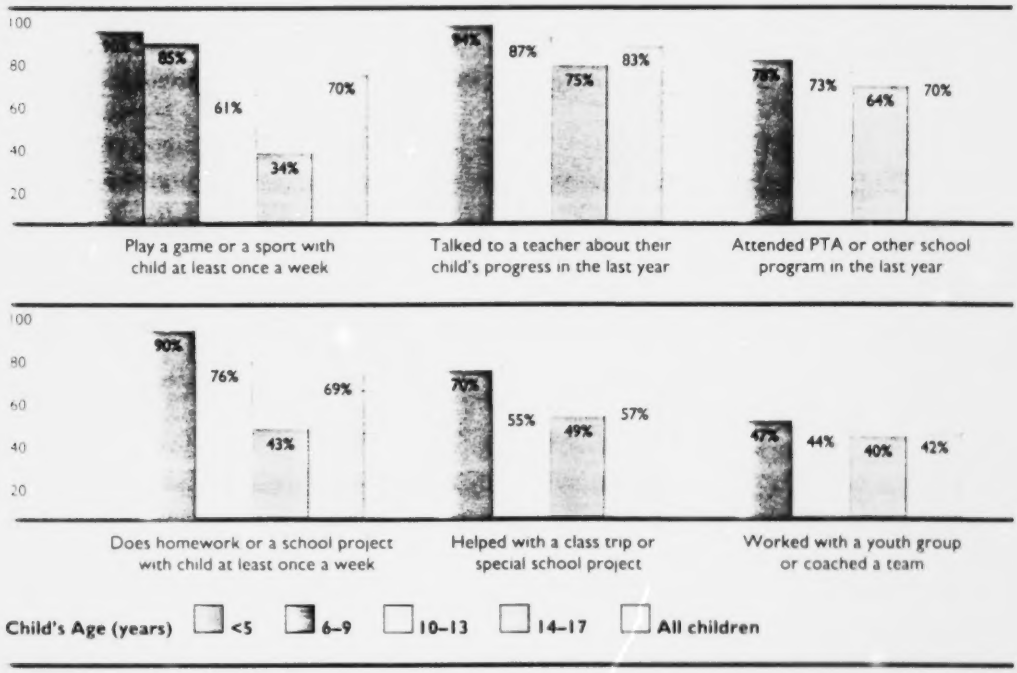
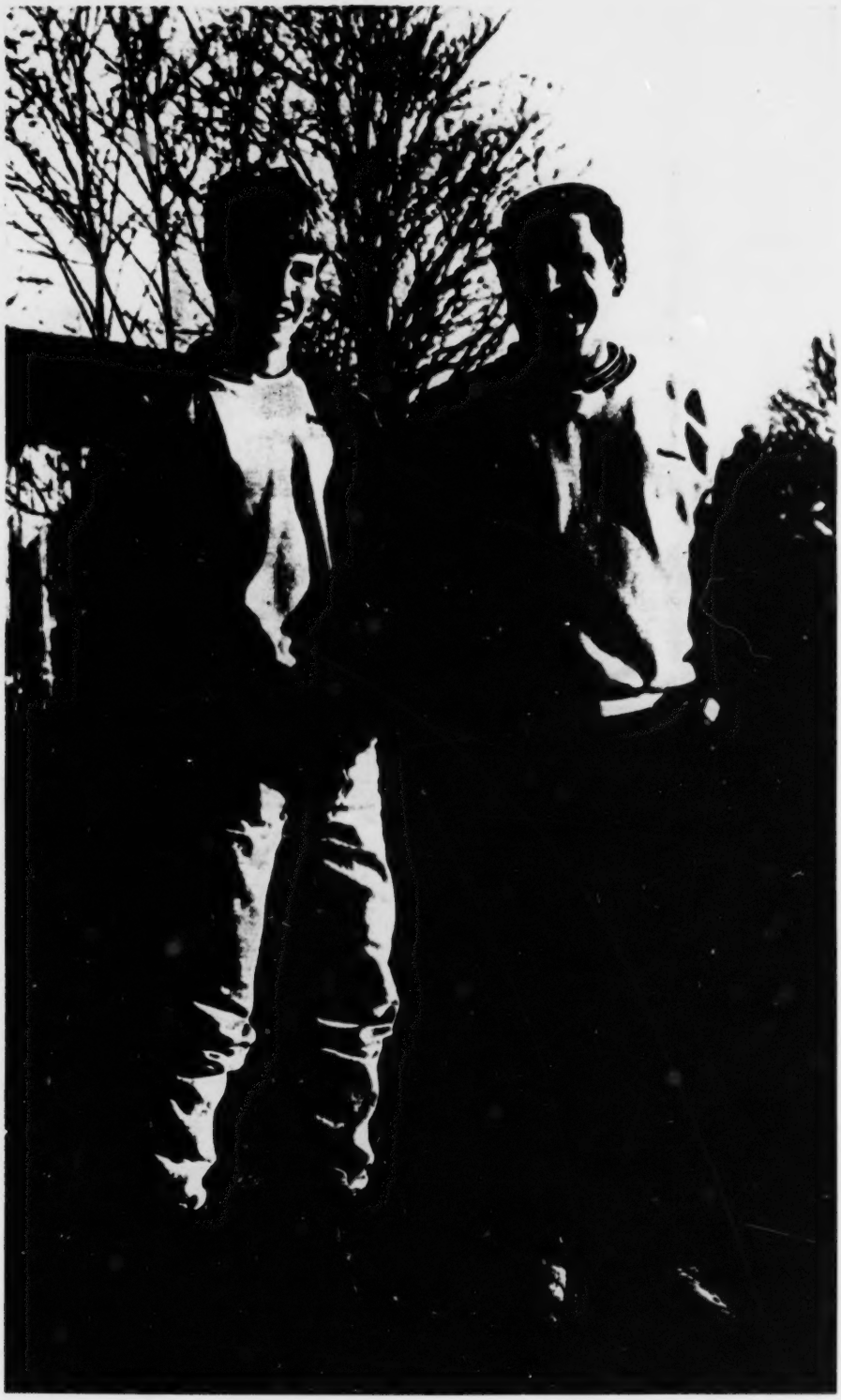


Figure 2

Parents' Involvement with Their Children's School and Activities, by Age of Child





Parental guidance is also evident in responses to questions concerning religious observance. Sixty-two percent of parents reported that they and their children attend religious services together at least monthly. Of those parents who report at least monthy attendance, almost three-quarters report that their families attend religious services at least once a week. Overall, 29 percent of parents reported teaching a Sunday school class or other religious program in the last year.

Survey findings suggest that parents and children spend somewhat less time together and share fewer activities as children get oider. In some cases, such as playing a game or sport together, decreasing time together may simply reflect young people's growing independence from family during adolescence. But in other instances, particularly those related to parents' participation in their children's schooling, it suggests diminishing parental involvement during the high school years, just as young people are making critical decisions about higher education and the work force (refer back to Figure 2).

Children's responses also indicated generally close relationships with their parents. When asked to name the special adults in their lives, children overwhelmingly named their mothers (94 percent) and their fathers (82 percent).

Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other relatives are mentioned by about 40 percent of children (see Figure 3). Parents also led the list of adults children admire and might want to emulate, although the percentages are not as dramatic: mothers were cited by 42 percent of children, fathers by 39 percent.

Most children appear to confide in their parents and look to them for guidance with problems and concerns. Slightly more than half reported talking to their parents at least once a week about something that is worrying them; another 32 percent said they discuss their concerns with their parents at least once a month. About two-thirds have a conversation with their parents at least once a month about religion or values; half of these say they talk at least once a week. More than half of teenagers (age 14 to 17) reported having talked at least once with their parents about dating (72 percent), sex (59 percent), and drug use (64 percent).

However, children's desire to discuss sensitive issues with parents drops markedly as they get older. Teenagers (age 14 to 17) are much less likely than children age 10 to 13 to express a desire to talk more with their parents about drugs, dating, sex, school, and problems with their friends (see Figure 4). To some extent, this reflects a decreasing reliance on parents for information and protection that is a normal part of adolescent development. But it is also reason for concern, since it suggests that many

Figure 3

Children's (Age 10-17) Rating of "Special Adults Who Really Care About Them"

Figure 4

Percentage of Children, by Age, Who Would Like to Talk More With Their Parents About Problems That Concern Them

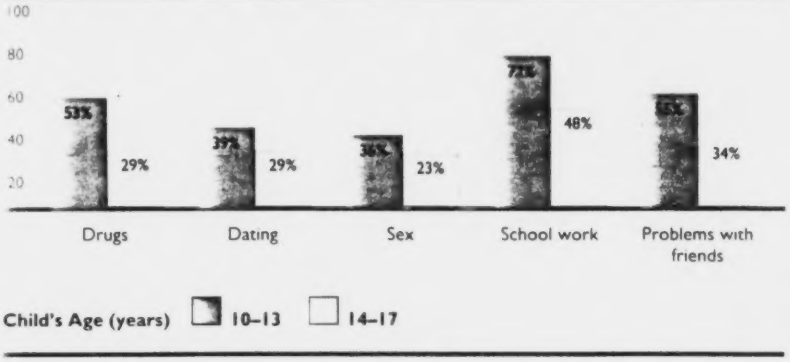


Figure 5

Percentage of Children (Age 10-17) Who Wish Their Parents Were Stricter or More Attentive

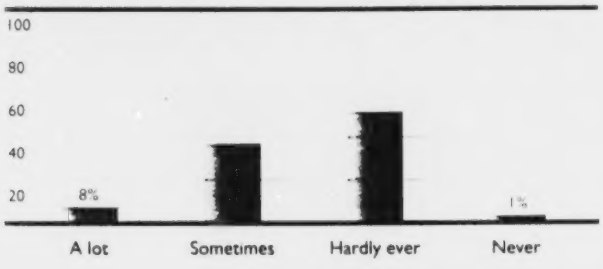
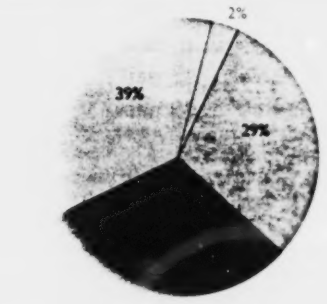


Figure 6

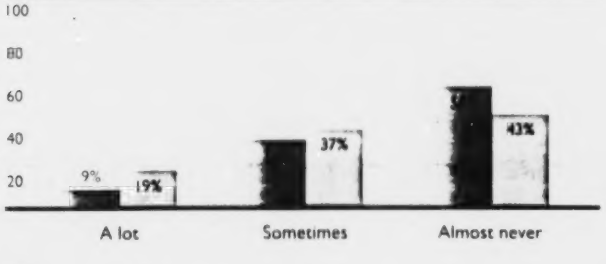
Parents' Assessment of the Amount of Time They Spend with Their Families



- Right amount
- Would like a lot more time
- Would like a little more time
- Would like less time

Figure 7

Children's (Age 10-17) Assessment of How Often Their Mothers and Fathers Miss Events and Activities That Are Important to Children



children become more resistant to parental guidance and monitoring at just the time in their lives when problems with drugs, sexuality, school, and peer relationships become more prevalent and often more severe.

Still, a surprisingly large percentage of children indicated that they wished their parents were more diligent about setting and enforcing rules. Thirty-nine percent of children age 10 to 17 said they "sometimes" wished their parents were stricter or kept a closer watch over them and their lives. Another 8 percent said they wish this a lot. Only about 1 percent said they "never" wanted their parents to be stricter or more attentive (see Figure 5).

Time Pressures: Family Time Is Hard to Find. Despite generally positive responses to questions concerning parent-child relationships and activities together, many parents clearly feel time pressures that leave them dissatisfied with the amount of family time they have. A majority of parents (59 percent) indicate that they would like more time with their children. Nearly 3 in 10 parents surveyed expressed a desire to spend a lot more time with their families. Another 3 in 10 would like "a little" more time with their families (see Figure 6).

On the other hand, the majority of children expressed satisfaction with the amount of time their parents spend with them, although they were more likely to report satisfaction with their mothers than their fathers. Eight out of 10 children believed their mothers spend enough time with them, while 7 out of 10 felt the same way about their fathers. While these are substantial majorities in both cases, the difference between mothers and fathers is striking. Almost one child in three (30 percent) would like more time with his or her father, compared to just one in five who wants more time with his or her mother.

Children also reported that their fathers are much more likely than their mothers to miss events or activities that the children consider important. Fifty-eight percent of children age 10 to 17 reported that their mothers "almost never" miss such events, compared to 43 percent who said the same about their fathers (see Figure 7). To some extent, these differences may reflect the longer hours worked by fathers. They also reflect the fact that most parents who live apart from their children are fathers. However, the question was asked only of children who either live with or have some regular contact with their fathers. Had it been asked of children who never see their fathers, the differences between mothers and fathers would almost certainly have been much more pronounced.

For those parents who live with their children, work outside the home is the major factor limiting their ability to spend time with their children. Many parents — especially fathers, but also mothers — report working longer hours than what is commonly considered full-time. One in two fathers and one in eight mothers indicated that they regularly work more than 40 hours a week. Astonishingly, one in three single parents indicated that they routinely work more than 40 hours a week. These findings underscore the difficulty many parents, but especially single parents, have supporting a family on just one income. They also suggest that, for some parents, economic or career concerns compete with children for time and attention.

Mothers who work full-time or more were the least likely to feel that they spend the "right amount" of time with their children. These mothers were also more likely to feel that they miss events that their children consider important. On the other hand, mothers who work part-time and mothers who do not work outside the home expressed similar levels of satisfaction with the amount of time they have with their children (see Figure 8).

Figure 8

Percentage of Mothers of Children (Age 17 and Younger) Who Feel They Have "the Right Amount of Time" With Their Family, by Number of Hours Mother Works per Week

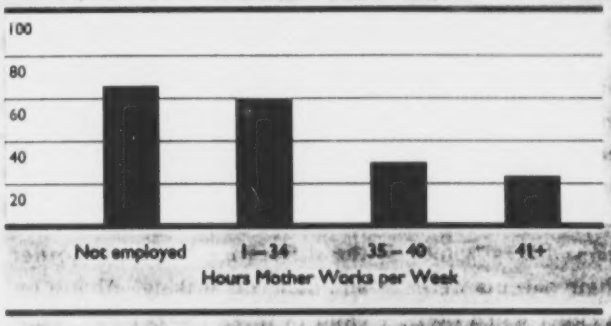
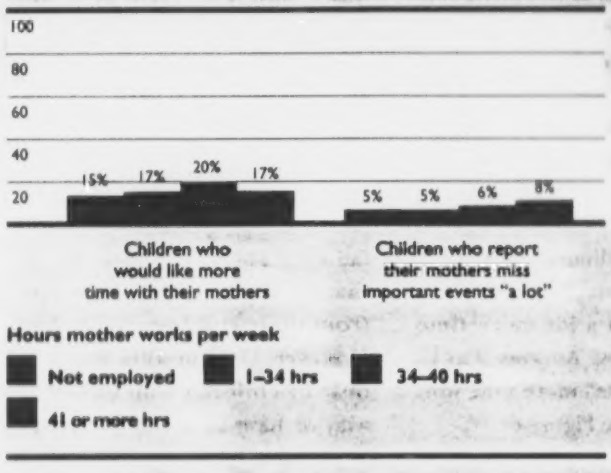


Figure 9

Children's (Age 10-17) Assessment of the Time and Attention They Receive From Their Mothers, by the Number of Hours Their Mothers Work per Week



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Interestingly, children of employed mothers appeared just about as satisfied with the amount of time they receive from their mothers as children whose mothers are at home full-time. Children of employed mothers were also not significantly more likely than children whose mothers are not employed to feel that their mothers frequently miss important events in their lives (see Figure 9).

Fathers who work more than 40 hours a week were less likely than other fathers to feel they spend the right amount of time with their children. While children of mothers who work full-time or more appeared satisfied with the time and attention they receive from their mothers, children whose fathers who work long hours expressed a desire for more time together.

Family Structure Matters

Children's assessments of their relationships with parents and parents' reports of how much time they spend on activities that are important to their children's well-being differ dramatically among types of families.

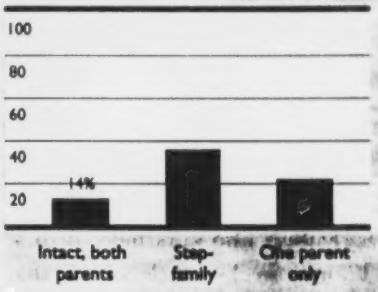
Two Parents: Best for Children. In general, the survey's most positive responses came from children and parents in intact, two-parent families.[c] Reports from children who live together with both of their parents tended to suggest greater parental involvement in children's schools and extracurricular activities than reports from children in single-parent families and stepfamilies. Children who live with both their parents are less likely than children in stepfamilies or single-parent families to report wanting more time with their parents (see Figure 10). They are also more likely to report that their mothers and fathers "always" respect their ideas and opinions and are less likely to feel that their mother or father misses "a lot" of events and activities that are important to the child (see Figure 11). While the majority of parents in all types of families find the time to talk to a child's teacher or attend a PTA meeting, mothers and fathers who live together in intact families are more likely to report that they are involved in time-intensive activities for or with their children. For example, they are more likely to coach a child's team or help with a school trip or class project (see Figure 12).

Marriage — or, more specifically, the presence of two adults in a household — is often an important buffer against poverty. Married parents in both intact and stepfamilies were only half as likely as single parents to report that they worry "all or most of the time" that their total income would not be enough to meet their family's expenses (see Figure 13).

The quality of the parents' marriage is also important to children's well-being. Parents who described their marriages as "very happy" or "pretty happy" were more likely to report strong and positive relationships with their children. Three-quarters of parents in intact families (i.e., families composed of two biological or adoptive parents) who characterize their marriages as happy report that they have an "excellent" relationship with their children, compared to just over half of parents in intact families who report that their marriage is "not too happy." Their children, in turn, are more likely to be satisfied with the amount of time they have with their parents and more likely to feel they can talk with their mothers and fathers about

Figure 10

Percentage of Children (Age 10-17) Who Want More Time With Their Mother, by Family Type

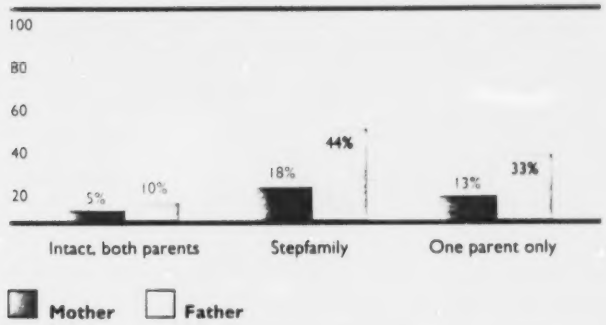


Note: "Intact, both parents" refers to biological or adoptive families in which both parents are present.

[c]Throughout this report, references to children living with both parents or children in intact, two-parent families apply to children living with both their natural parents or with two adoptive parents.

Figure 11

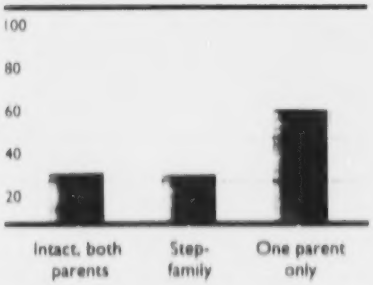
Percentage of Children (Age 10-17) Who Report That Their Mother or Father Often Misses Events and Activities That Children Consider Important, by Family Type



Note: "Intact, both parents" refers to biological or adoptive families in which both parents are present.

Figure 13

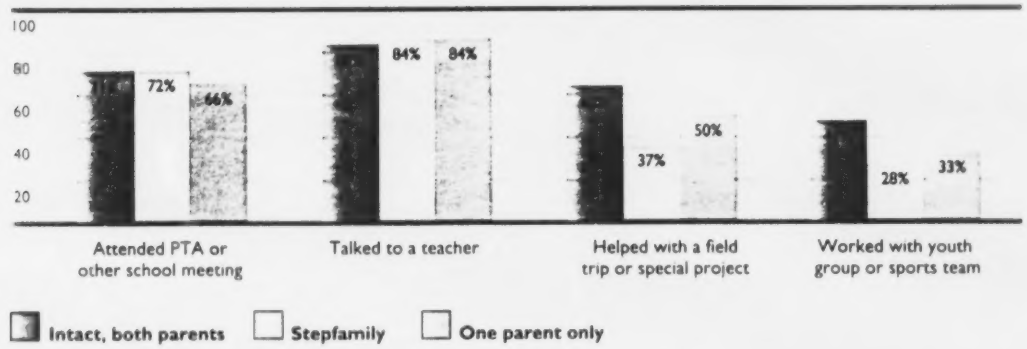
Percentage of Parents Who Worry All or Most of the Time That Their Incomes Will Not Meet Expenses, by Family Type



Note: "Intact, both parents" refers to biological or adoptive families in which both parents are present.

Figure 12

Percentage of Parents of Children (Age 6-17) Who Have Taken Part in School-Related Activities in the Past Year, by Family Type



Note: "Intact, both parents" refers to biological or adoptive families in which both parents are present.

problems or concerns. Parents in stepfamilies who say their marriages are happy are also more likely than those in unhappy marriages to report excellent relationships with their children. These findings on stepparents, however, are tempered by the finding that parent-child relationships appear to be closer in single-parent families than in stepfamilies, regardless of stepparents' marital happiness (see Figure 14).

Single Parenthood: Hard on Parents, Hard on Kids. Compared to children who live with both their parents, children who live with only one of their parents appeared disadvantaged in several important areas. While children in single-parent families indicated as much closeness with their custodial parent as children in two-parent families reported with both of their parents, the absence of one parent clearly takes its toll on children and custodial parents. On average, the financial and emotional aspects of daily life tend to be more difficult for single-parent families than intact families. Among parents surveyed by the Commission, 23 percent in single-parent households reported incomes under $10,000 a year, compared to just 2 percent in intact families and 6 percent in stepfamilies. Not surprisingly, more than half of single parents

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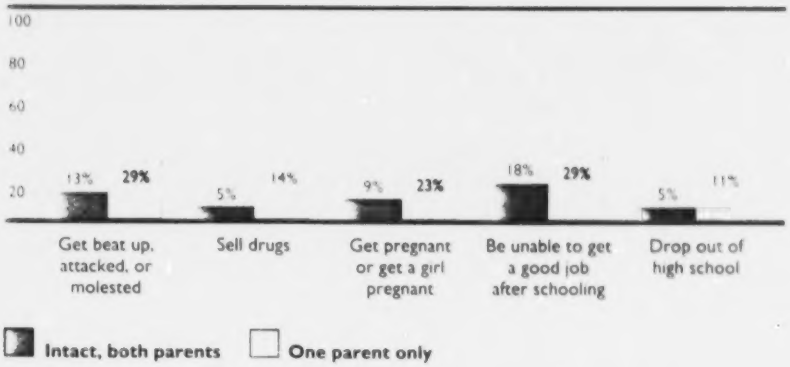
Figure 14

Percentage of Parents Who Report Having an "Excellent" Relationship with Their Children, by Reported Marital Happiness and Family Type

Note: "Intact, both parents" refers to biological or adoptive families in which both parents are present.

Figure 15

Percentage of Parents, by Family Type, Who Worry "a Lot" That Their Teenage Children (Age 14-17) Will:



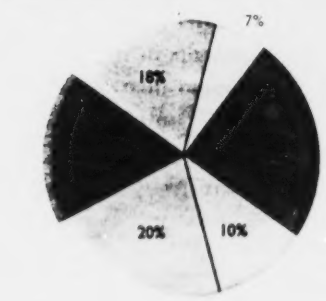
Note: "Intact, both parents" refers to biological or adoptive families in which both parents are present.

reported worrying all or most of the time that their family income would not be enough to meet their expenses, compared to less than a quarter of parents in two-parent families.

Single parents are also more likely than parents in intact families to worry about their children's physical safety and long-term prospects. They are less likely to consider their neighborhoods excellent or good places to raise children. Accordingly, they are also more likely — generally two or more times more likely than married parents — to worry that their teenage children will be physically attacked, will become involved in selling drugs, will become pregnant or get a girl pregnant, will drop out of school, or will be unable to find a good job upon completing school (see Figure 15).

Figure 16

Children's (Age 17 and Younger) Contact with Fathers Who Live Apart from Them

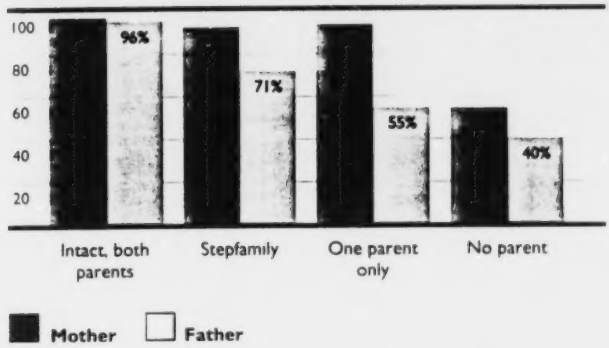


- Almost every day
- Almost every week
- Almost every month
- Less than once a month
- Have not seen in a year, though most have received a phone call or letter
- Have not seen in five years

Note: Data for children age 9 and younger was provided by the child's mother or guardian who completed the parent interview. Children age 10-17 responded for themselves.

Figure 17

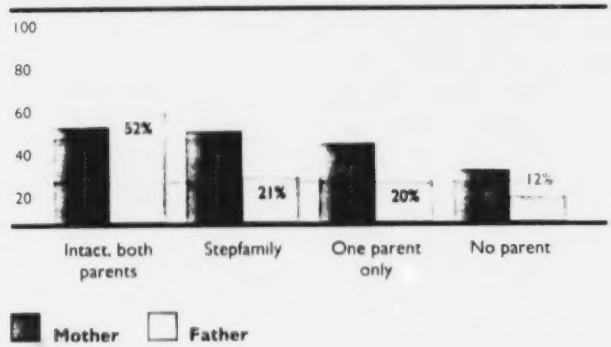
Percentage of Children (Age 10-17) Who Feel That Their Mother and Father "Really Care," by Family Type



Note: "Intact, both parents" refers to biological or adoptive families in which both parents are present. "Mother" and "father" refer to a child's biological or adoptive parents.

Figure 18

Percentage of Children (Age 10-17) Who Look Up to and Admire Their Mother or Father, by Family Type



Note: "Intact, both parents" refers to biological or adoptive families in which both parents are present. "Mother" and "father" refer to a child's biological or adoptive parents.

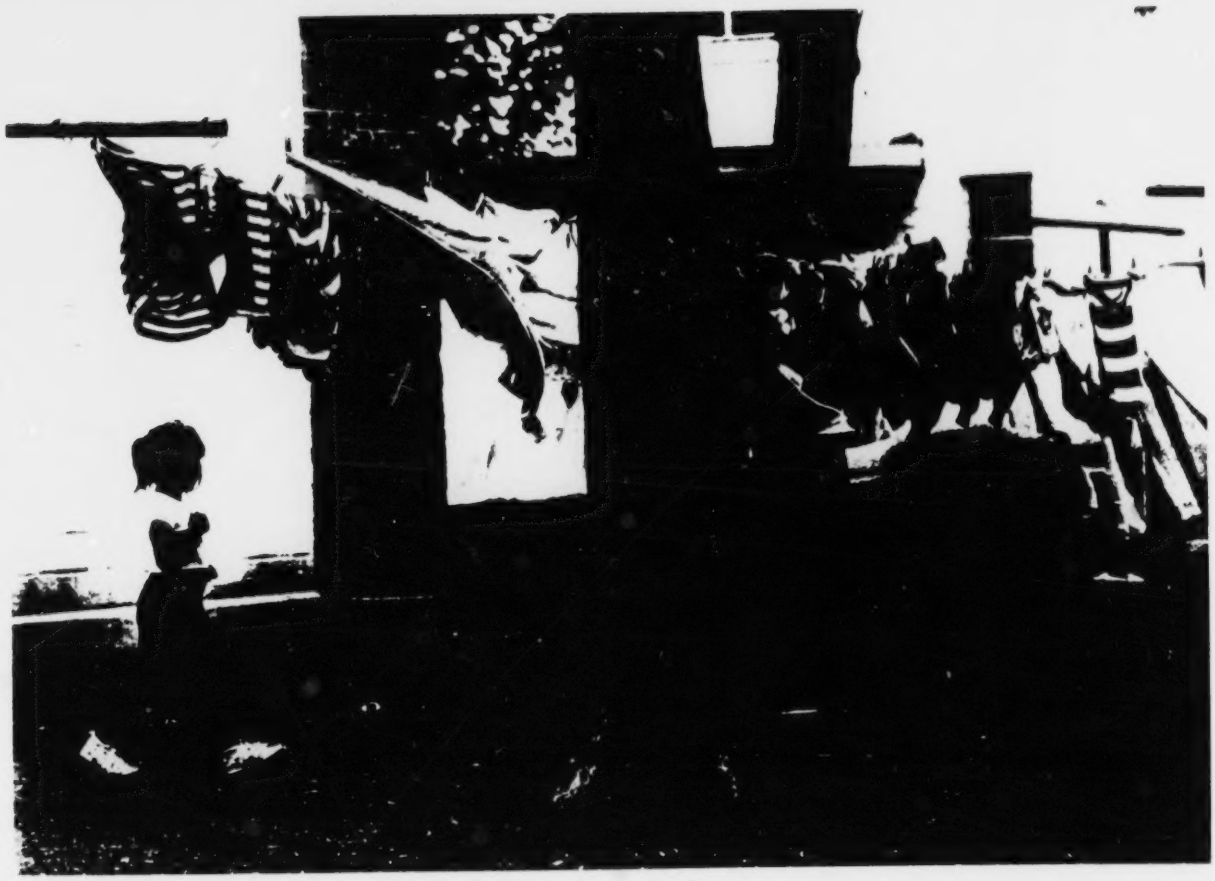
Stepfamilies: Mixed Blessings for Kids. While the survey's findings about single parents and their children were largely expected, the findings about stepfamilies were surprising and in some cases disturbing. Though stepfamilies generally reported greater economic security than single-parent families, their responses to questions about the quality of parent-child relationships, the amount of time parents and children spend together, and the level of parental involvement in a child's school and extracurricular activities often indicated less emotional security and less closeness than was the case in single-parent families. Children in stepfamilies are more likely than children in intact families and more likely than children being raised by a single parent to wish for more time with their mothers (refer back to Figure 10). Parents in stepfamilies are less likely than parents in intact families and less likely than single parents to rate their relationship with their children as excellent. While single parents are less likely than parents in intact families to report involvement in such time-intensive activities as coaching a child's team or helping with a class trip or school project, parents in stepfamilies are the least likely of all to take part in these kinds of activities (refer back to Figure 12).

While the survey findings do not indicate that most children in stepfamilies are at extreme emotional risk, they underscore the point that intact families — particularly those with strong marriages — provide the best environment for raising children. When a single parent marries or remarries, parent-child relationships are likely to undergo significant changes, not always for the better. This may reflect additional stress as both parent and child adapt to a new family arrangement. It may also reflect competing demands on a parent's time and attention from a new spouse. In either case, the survey findings suggest that when parents form stepfamilies, they should take special care to help their children through what is often a difficult and lengthy adjustment period.

Absent Parents, Missing Parents. Among the most poignant findings from the Commission's surveys were those related to children who live apart from a parent, in most cases their fathers. For many of these children, the term "absent father" is more than a technical designation. Their responses to questions about their fathers describe relationships that are frequently tenuous and too often nonexistent. Only a third of these children report that they see their fathers at least once a week, and nearly one in five has not seen his or her father for five years (see Figure 16).

When asked to name "the special adults in your own life, the adults who really care about you," nearly all children in intact, two-parent families mentioned both their mother and their father. Children in single-parent families were as likely as children in two-parent families to name their custodial parent as a special adult who really cares, but far less likely to view their absent parent in this way (see Figure 17). Similarly, children who do not live with a parent are much less likely to name that parent (usually a father) as an adult they "look up to and admire" (see Figure 18).

But the children who appeared most bereft were those who live with neither of their parents and are instead being raised by grandparents, other relatives, or foster parents. Only about half of these children name their mother or father as a special adult who really cares about them, compared to virtually every child living with both parents (see Figure 17). Only 12 percent of these children name their father as an adult they admire and might want to be like, while 24 percent name their mothers. In comparison, 52 percent of children living with both parents name their fathers and 44 percent their mothers as people they might want to emulate (see Figure 18).



Twenty-nine percent of children who do not live with their parents report that they often feel "lonely," compared to only about 7 percent of children in intact and single-parent families. Similarly, one child in three living apart from their parents reports that he or she often feels "sad and blue," compared to about 1 in 10 children in intact and single-parent families. While children in stepfamilies are somewhat more likely than children in intact and single-parent families to report feeling sad and blue, the difference is not as pronounced as it is for children who live with neither of their parents (see Figure 19).

Worries and Fears

Virtually all parents worry from time to time that their children will be harmed or will succumb to peer pressure to engage in behavior and activities that are risky or ill-advised. In general, however, parents expressed considerable confidence in their ability to influence their children's decisions about personal conduct and risk-taking. Most parents believed they could do a great deal to discourage their children from becoming involved in activities that pose immediate threats, such as drug and alcohol use, and those that place their future at risk, such as poor school performance (see Figure 20).

But parents are much less confident of their ability to make significant improvements in their communities. Just over half thought they could do "a lot" to improve the quality of their children's schools. Less than half thought they could get more youth programs and activities in their neighborhood (see Figure 20).

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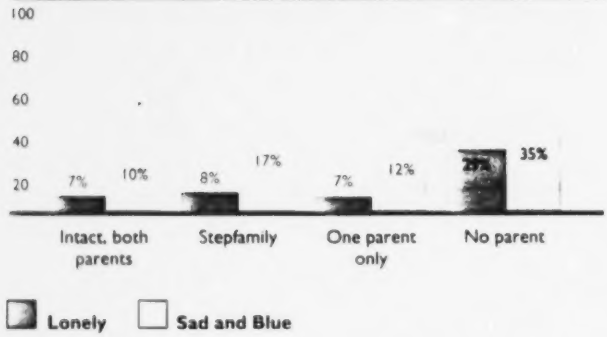
Figure 19

Percentage of Children (Age 10-17) Who Report That They Often Feel "Lonely" or "Sad and Blue," by Family Type



Note: "Intact, both parents" refers to biological or adoptive families in which both parents are present.

Figure 20

Percentage of Parents Who Feel They Can Do "a Lot" to:

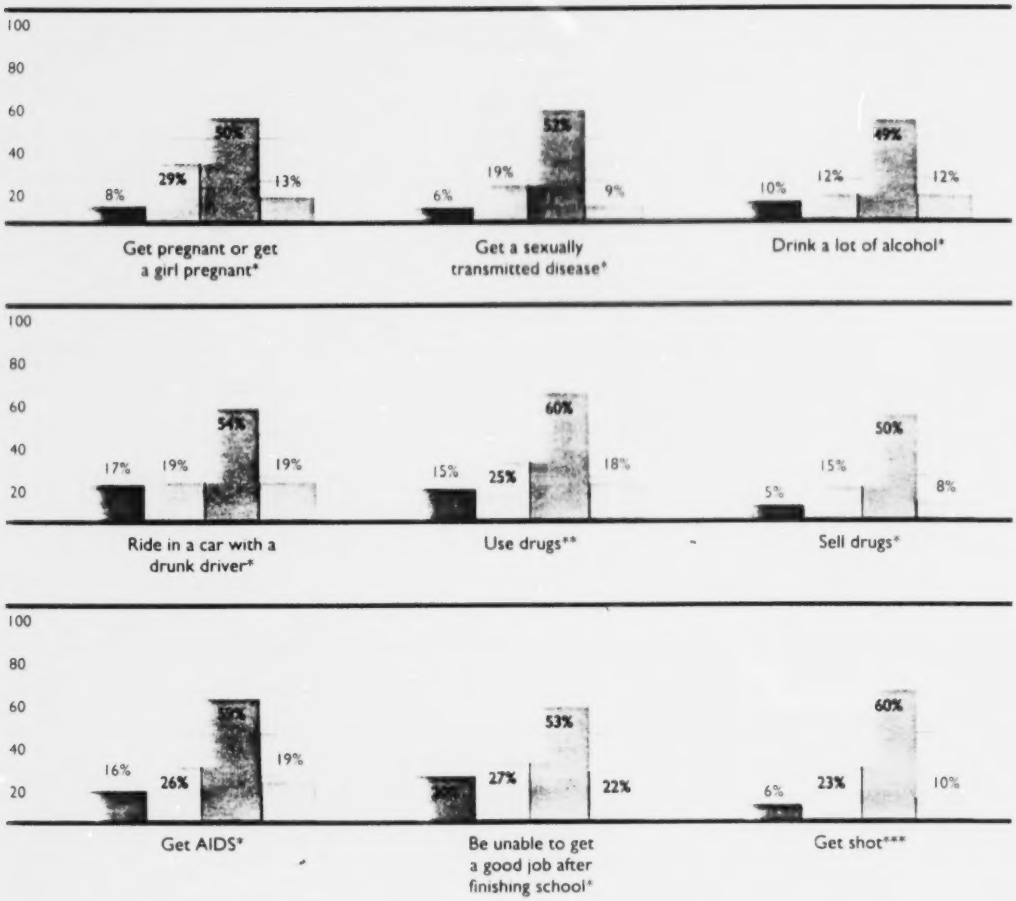
100
80
60
40
20
71%
54%
Keep their child from using drugs*
Keep their child from drinking a lot of alcohol*
Keep their child from doing poorly in school*
Keep their child from feeling badly about himself or herself*
Keep their child from getting beat up, attacked, or molested*
Get rid of drugs in the community**
Improve the quality of their child's school**
Get more programs and activities for youth in their neighborhood**

* Asked of parents whose children are age 6-17

** Asked of parents whose children are age 0-17

Figure 21

Percentage of Parents, by Race or Ethnic Background, Who Worry "a Lot" That Their Child Will:



* Asked of parents whose children are age 14–17.
** Asked of parents whose children are age 10–17.
*** Asked of parents whose children are age 0–17.

Nor are parents confident of their ability to protect their children from physical harm. Nearly half of all parents reported that there is no safe place in their neighborhood for children and teenagers to gather, other than their own homes. Seventeen percent of parents of teenagers (age 14 to 17) worry a lot that their children will get beaten up, attacked or molested. Fifteen percent worry a lot that their teenager will get shot. To some extent, these fears may reflect broader social concern over the explosion of random violence that seems to claim children and youth disproportionately as victims.

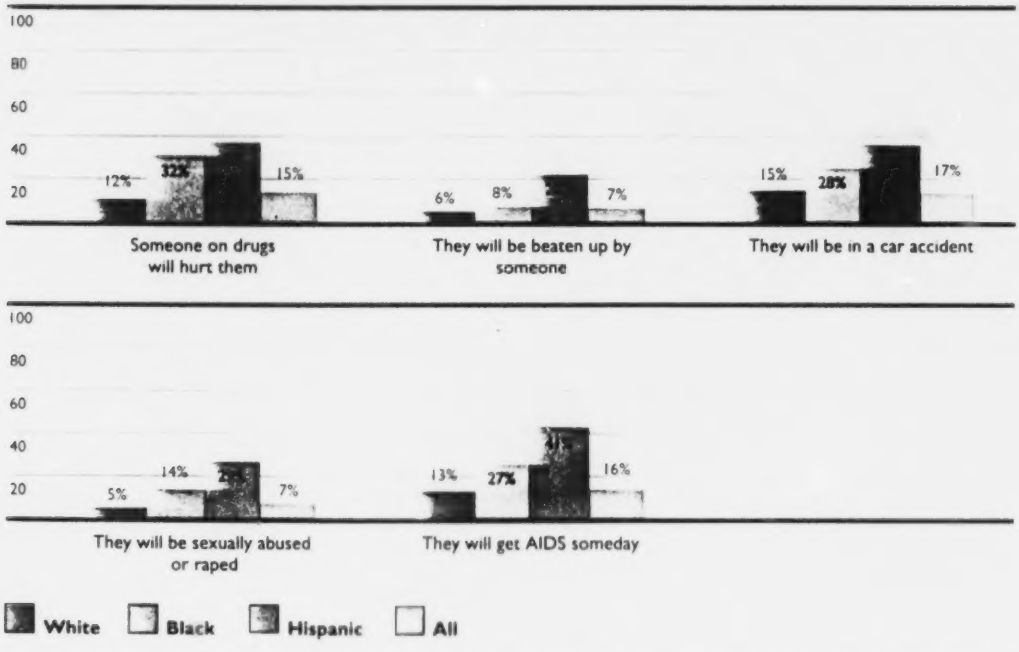
The degree to which parents' sense of their own efficacy declines as one moves further from the family circle is striking. Most parents believe strongly in their ability to influence their children's decisions about personal conduct and risk-taking. They are less confident of their ability to bring about change in schools and neighborhoods or to protect their children against serious harm from outside forces.

Minority Parents Worry More. While most parents report concern from time to time that their children will use poor judgment, get involved with troublemakers, or be the victims of a violent or careless act, minority parents were much more likely than white parents to indicate extreme and frequent fear about their children's physical safety and well-being.

Black parents were one and a half to three times as likely as white parents to report that they worry a lot that their teenagers (age 14 to 17) will engage in unsafe or dangerous activities, get into trouble, or be harmed by someone else. Responses from Hispanic parents were even more shocking. They were 5 to 10 times as likely as white parents to express extreme levels of fear and anxiety, and twice as likely as black parents. Half or more of Hispanic parents surveyed reported that they worry a lot that their teenage son or daughter will sell or use drugs, use alcohol, ride in a car with a drunk driver, get pregnant or get a girl pregnant, or get AIDS. More than 60 percent of Hispanic parents report worrying a lot that their son or daughter will be shot (see Figure 21).

Figure 22

Percentage of Children (Age 10–17) by Race or Ethnic Background Who Worry "a Lot" That:



Though children generally worry less than adults, minority children, like their parents, expressed higher levels of concern that they would be harmed than did white children. Hispanic children indicated the highest levels of anxiety. Almost 40 percent of Hispanic children and teenagers reported worrying a lot that someone on drugs might hurt them, as did 32 percent of black and 12 percent of white children and teenagers. Close to 30 percent of Hispanic children and teenagers worried a lot that they would be sexually abused or raped, compared to 14 percent of black and just 5 percent of white children and teenagers (see Figure 22).

To some extent, higher levels of fear and anxiety among minorities reflect the disproportionately large share of minorities living in poverty and in urban centers. The extreme levels of concern among Hispanic parents may also reflect the anxiety felt by immigrant families about the unfamiliar circumstances of their lives. Half of all interviews with Hispanic parents were conducted in Spanish because the parent either did not speak English or was more comfortable completing the interview in Spanish, and this subgroup of Hispanic parents expressed the greatest levels of worry. This suggests that a significant percentage of Hispanic respondents are relatively recent arrivals in the United States. For them, life in urban America may be both confusing and threatening.

Figure 23

Percentage of Parents Who Worry "All the Time" That Their Family Income Will Not Be Enough, By Family Income

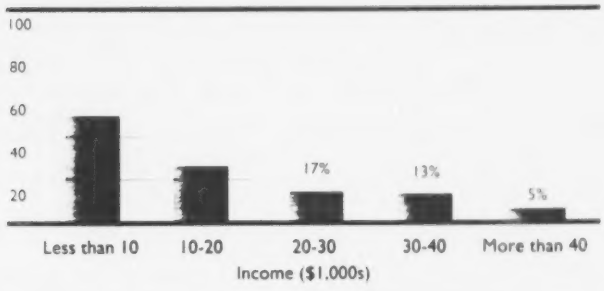
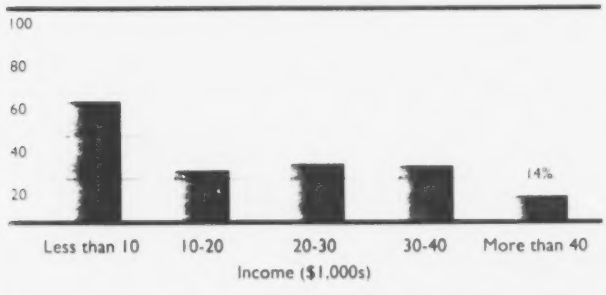


Figure 24

Percentage of Parents Who Report that They or Their Spouse Were Laid Off or Unemployed in the Past Year, By Family Income

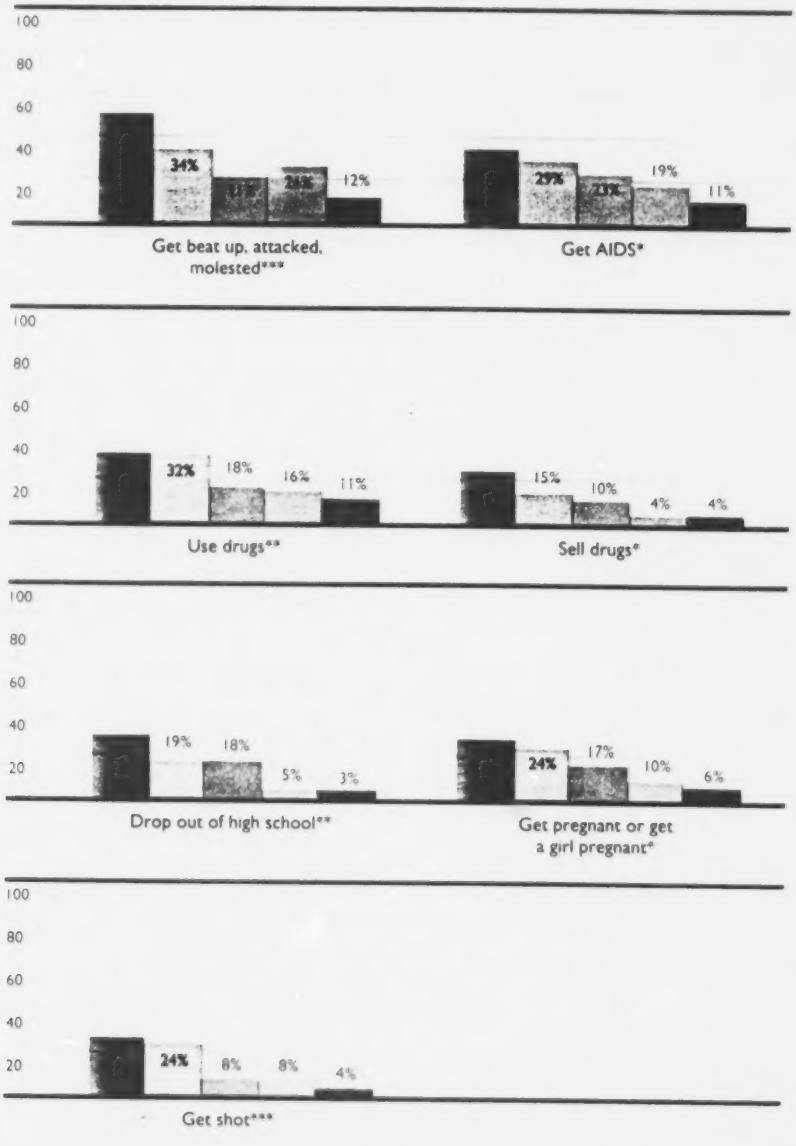


Poor Parents Worry Most. Regardless of race or ethnicity, low-income parents express greater concern — beginning with economic concerns, but extending well beyond them — than do parents who are more financially secure. While more than half of all parents (55 percent) report worrying at least some of the time that their family income will not be enough to meet their living expenses, many poor parents (those whose family incomes are $10,000 or less) appear to live with almost constant economic stress. More than half of these parents (53 percent) report that they worry "all the time" that they will not be able to meet their living expenses (see Figure 23). They clearly have reason to worry. Fifty-eight percent reported that they or their spouses had been laid off or unemployed at some time in the last year (see Figure 24).

But the stress that low-income parents feel extends well beyond economic worries to include a multitude of concerns about their children's safety and well-being. Poor parents were the least likely to consider their neighborhood an "excellent" place to raise children and were the most likely to cite crime and violence, lack of police protection, and poorly supervised young people as "big problems" in their communities. They were also two or more times as likely as more affluent parents to worry that their children would be seriously injured, get AIDS, use or sell drugs, drop out of high school, or become a teenage parent (see Figure 25).

Figure 25

Percentage of Parents, by Family Income, Who Worry "a Lot" That Their Child Will:



* Asked of parents whose children are age 14–17.
** Asked of parents whose children are age 10–17.
*** Asked of parents whose children are age 0–17.

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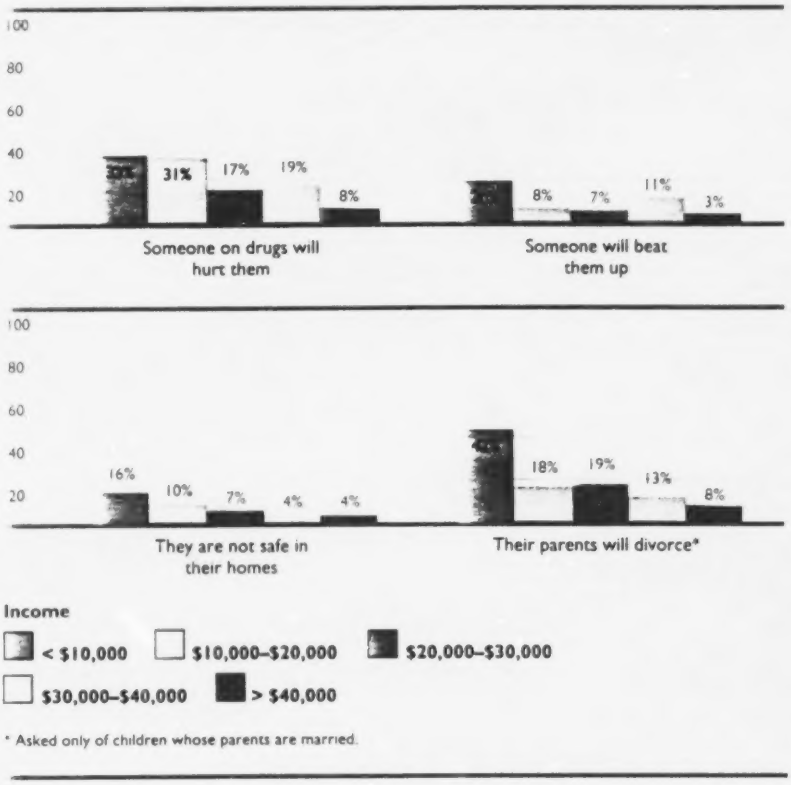
Their children worry as well. Almost a third of the poor children surveyed, even those as young as 10, reported worrying a lot that "someone on drugs" will hurt them. Their insecurity extended beyond external threats to their safety to include their family life as well. More than 40 percent of low-income children — perhaps reacting to the stresses that poverty and joblessness place on a marriage and family life — reported worrying that their parents will divorce. In contrast, only 8 percent of children in more affluent families (those with incomes over $40,000) reported the same concern about family breakup (see Figure 26).

Figure 26

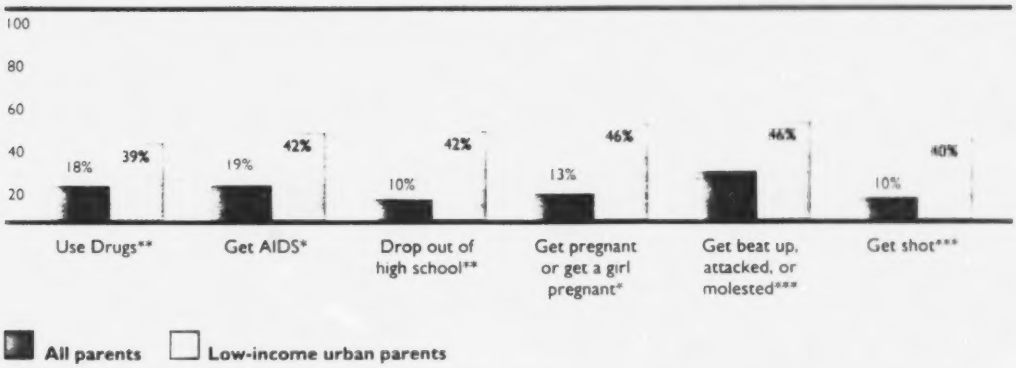
Percentage of Children (Age 10-17), by Family Income, Who Worry "a Lot" That:



* Asked only of children whose parents are married.

Figure 27

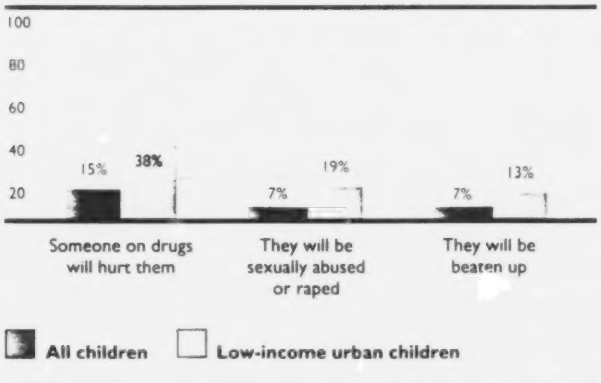
Percentage of Low-Income Urban Parents Who Worry "a Lot" That Their Child Will:



* Asked of parents whose children are age 14–17
** Asked of parents whose children are age 10–17
*** Asked of parents whose children are age 0–17

Figure 28

Percentage of Low-Income Urban Children (Age 10-17) Who Worry "a Lot" That:



Poor Families, Large Cities: A Dangerous Combination for Children. By far, poor families under the greatest stress live in large cities. These children and parents painted a grim picture of childhoods spent in dangerous, desolate neighborhoods. Predominantly minority, they report daily levels of fear and tension that are almost inconceivable. Indeed, 40 percent of urban poor parents worry that their children will get shot. Forty-two percent worry that their children will drop out of school, and 46 percent that their teenagers (ages 14 to 17) will get pregnant or get a girl pregnant (see Figure 27). Thirty-eight percent of urban poor children worry a lot that someone on drugs will hurt them, 19 percent that they will be sexually abused or raped, and 13 percent that someone will beat them up (see Figure 28). The enormous extent to which parents and children fear that children will be physically harmed suggest that many are living in neighborhoods in which violence and tragedy are routine parts of daily life.

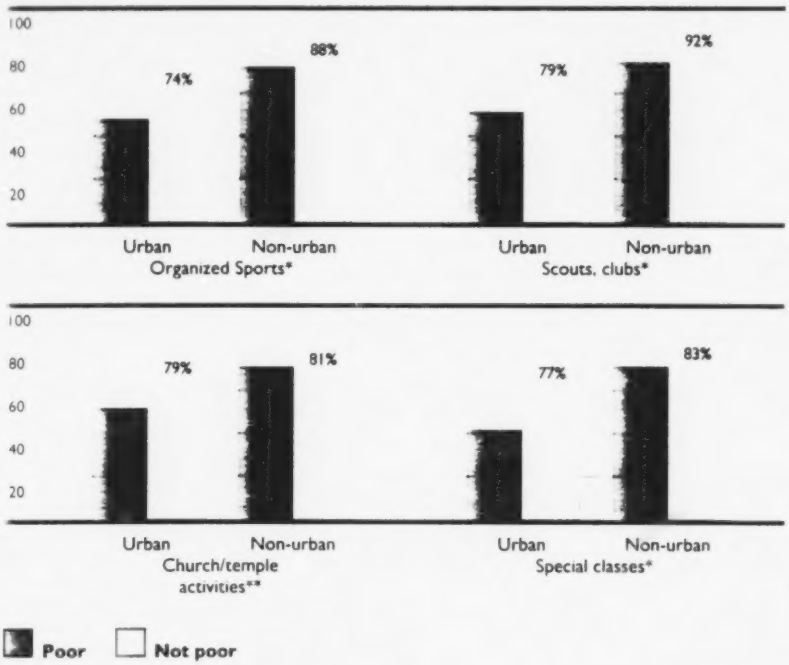
While these are clearly the families most in need of social support from relatives, friends, community organizations, churches, and schools, they are also the least likely to report the presence of either formal or informal means of support in their lives. Poor urban parents are more likely than other parents to report that they have no one to turn to for advice or help with a child's problem. Poor urban children are less likely than other children to look upon their schools as safe or supportive environments. While most of the children surveyed reported liking their schools and feeling safe in them, poor urban children were much less likely to report liking school and much more likely to say they do not feel safe there. Poor parents generally, and especially those in urban areas, share their children's dissatisfaction. Well over one-third (37 percent) of poor urban parents say they would enroll their children in different schools if they had the opportunity to do so.

Activities and clubs for young people are also less available to low-income urban children, even though they may benefit from

them as much as children from more affluent families. While some youth-serving organizations such as Scouts and Boys' and Girls' Clubs are present in these neighborhoods, poor urban children are significantly less likely than children living elsewhere (poor and affluent alike) to report that these clubs and activities are available to them. The same is true for organized sports and church activities for young people (see Figure 29). Even programs that might be particularly useful to urban poor children and their families — such as tutoring programs, child care, summer camp, and summer and after-school employment — are no more readily available, and in many cases are less readily available, to urban poor children than to others.

Figure 29

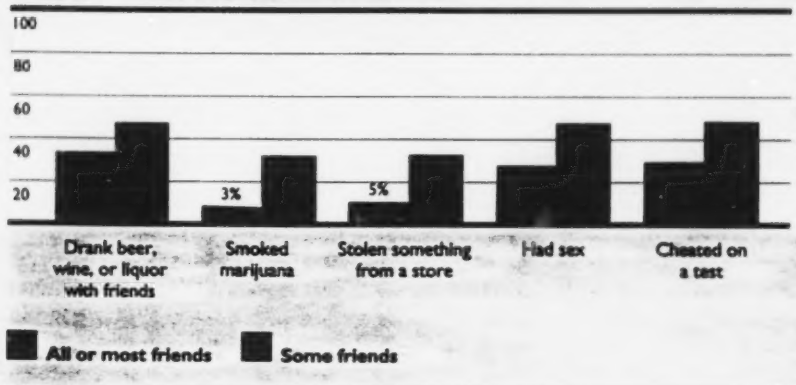
Percentage of Children to Whom Activities Are Available, by Residence and Family Income



* Asked of parents whose children are age 6–17.
** Asked of parents whose children are age 0–17.

Figure 30

Percentage of Adolescents (Age 14-17) Who Report That Some or Most of Their Friends Have Engaged in Risky Activities



Teenagers: In Need of Guidance and Support

Substantial percentages, and in some cases a majority, of adolescents (age 14 to 17) responding to the Commission's surveys indicated that at least some of their friends were involved in such high-risk activities as drinking, drug use, cheating, stealing, and premature sexual activity (see Figure 30). Because adolescents' perceptions of their friends' actions and attitudes have enormous influence over their own conduct and behavior, these findings suggest that a substantial percentage of young people may themselves be leaning toward, if not already involved in, these same kinds of activities. Indeed, parents of children who report that their friends are engaged in high-risk activities were more likely than parents of other children to report that their sons and daughters also engage in risky activities.

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Thus, while many of the risks faced by children today are concentrated in certain communities and income groups, young people who report friends involved in high-risk activities are found in all social groups. They are not limited to low-income, urban, or single-parent households. Teenagers in every community, at every income level, and in every type of family reported that they had friends whose conduct is potentially harmful to themselves and others.

Young people with high-risk friends are in particular need of adult support. Research suggests strongly that such guidance and monitoring can significantly lessen the likelihood of a young person engaging in risky activities. Yet young people with high-risk friends were less likely than others to report that their parents generally know what they are doing when they are away from home, that their parents consistently make them follow rules, or that they routinely discuss religion, values, or personal worries with their parents. In addition, their parents were less likely to report involvement with the children's schools. These parents also appeared more isolated, with a greater tendency than other parents to report that they had no one to talk to about their children's problems.

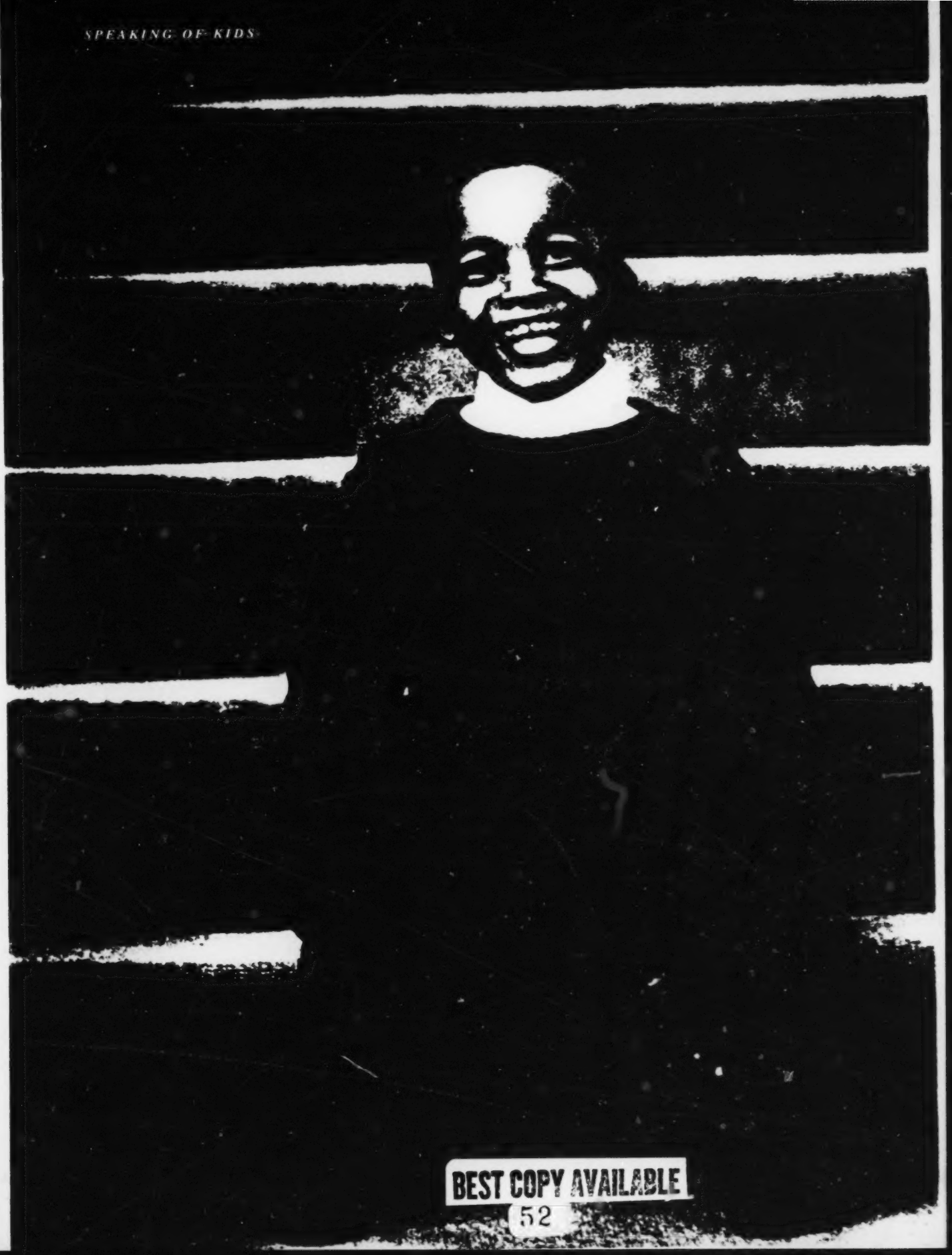
Conclusion

Much of what these surveys reveal about parents, children, and family life in America corresponds with what the National Commission on Children saw and heard at its hearings, town meetings, forums, and focus groups. In part, the surveys echoed themes heard consistently across the country — of the close bonds between parents and children, the sacrifices many parents make for their children, and the affection and respect most children have for their parents.

But the surveys also underscored and gave scientific credence to the stresses that many children and parents expressed to the Commission, often in painful and powerful terms. These stresses are experienced not just by a vocal few who attend town meetings, but by large numbers of contemporary American families. In some cases, they stem from a lack of time or money. In other cases, they are the result of external threats to families' well-being, particularly dangerous, violent neighborhoods. In still other cases, stresses are attributable to the actions of parents, including those who are physically or psychologically absent from their children's lives.

Finally, the surveys remind us that, as individuals and as a society, we often do the least for those who need the most. Poor families generally, and particularly poor urban families, were the least likely to report the presence of formal and informal sources of support. In fact, inadequate support tends to characterize all families, regardless of income level or community size, whose adolescent sons and daughters appear at risk of engaging in dangerous or destructive activities. It is certainly true for children who live apart from one or both parents.

These surveys of children and parents offered the Commission important insights into the strengths and vulnerabilities of American families and helped members refine some of the Commission's basic themes and recommendations. These themes and recommendations and how they intersect with and derive from the survey data are discussed in the next section.



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A New American Agenda for Children and Families

The surveys conducted by the National Commission on Children were part of a two-and-a-half year investigation into the health and well-being of the nation's children that yielded recommendations for public and private sector actions to support children and strengthen their families. As the Commission reviewed the survey findings in the course of its deliberations, several themes emerged; these themes influenced a number of the principles and recommendations in the Commission's final report, **Beyond Rhetoric: A New American Agenda for Children and Families**. In particular, the surveys highlight the close and enduring bonds between children and the parents who raise them, and they emphasize the importance of strong, stable families to children's healthy development and long-term well-being. The surveys also identify some of the factors within family life that can jeopardize children's well-being, notably the continued absence of a parent, as well as the external constraints that can make it difficult to raise chidren, including limitations on available time and money, dangerous streets and neighborhoods, and limited opportunities for young people. These findings contributed to and support the Commission's conclusion that individual behavior and attitudes as well as public policies and social factors play important roles in determining children's health and well-being.

How Are Families Faring? Views from Inside and Outside

Perhaps the most heartening news from the Commission's surveys is that most parents and children report satisfying family lives. Most parents report that they work hard to provide warm and nurturing homes for their children. Judging from their children's responses, many parents succeed. Children's general satisfaction with their family lives and parents' obvious commitment to their children conflict with the public's harsh judgment of parents. This divergence of public and private perceptions is puzzling, even more so when data from the survey of the general adult population reveal that parents raising children do not differ significantly from other adults in their negative view of contemporary family life.

The reason seems to lie in part in the differences between the inherent strengths of families and the factors that can undermine or work against them. The successes that many families achieve reflect close bonds between parents and children and considerable sacrifice by many parents for their children. For many families, success comes in spite of substantial obstacles posed by limited time and money, insufficient support from an absent parent, a shortage of supportive community institutions, and the proliferation of violence on many streets and neighborhoods. The survey findings are particularly clear in identifying those factors that make a parent's job harder:

- when a mother (and occasionally a father) raises a child without the consistent support and involvement of the child's other parent;
- when work and other demands severely restrict the time available to spend with children or to become involved in children's school or extracurricular activities;
- when parents are preoccupied with worry that their income is not sufficient to meet their family's basic needs;
- when violence and reckless behavior leave children vulnerable to long-term harm;
- when young people feel pressure from peers to engage in dangerous or delinquent behavior and when popular culture makes such behavior appear glamorous.

All of these problems have become more prevalent in America in recent decades. Most families are susceptible to at least one or two factors that can tax the internal resources of even the strongest families. In particular, time limitations — typically ascribed to the increasing hours mothers work outside the home, but also influenced by many fathers' demanding work schedules and low involvement in childrearing — can affect parents at every income level. Concerns about violence, while particularly pronounced among urban families, have spread to other families as well. Thirteen million children — 2 million more than a decade ago — are poor, and millions more live in families with incomes above, but uncomfortably close to, the poverty line.[d] The number of parents, usually mothers, raising children alone has also risen dramatically, contributing to rising rates of childhood poverty and growing numbers of families in which one parent must shoulder the financial and emotional responsibilities of two. Finally, the presence of negative role models in popular culture or the neighborhood presents a challenge few parents can easily dismiss.

[d] In 1989, the Census Bureau's poverty threshold was $9,885 for a family of three, $12,675 for a family of four, and $14,990 for a family of five.

Public awareness of these changes and their often deleterious effects on children has grown in recent years, but individual and social solutions have often lagged behind the rapid pace of change. The result is heightened public unease about the well-being of children and the strength of their families, which is reflected in the extreme levels of concern expressed by the public — including parents — in the Commission's surveys.

Supporting and Strengthening Families

Findings from the Commission's surveys are consistent with research findings on child development and family structure that underscore the importance of strong, stable families headed by two adults committed to each other and able to meet the responsibilities of parenthood. In general, two-parent families are less likely than single-parent families to face protracted, severe economic hardship and its associated stresses and constraints. Certainly the two-parent families surveyed were far less likely than their single-parent counterparts to be poor. Children who live in intact families — that is, with both of their biological or adoptive parents — tend to receive more parental time, attention, and guidance than children living with a single parent or in a stepfamily. Indeed, in the Commission's surveys, children in these intact families reported higher levels of satisfaction with the time and attention

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they received from their parents, and they were less likely to report that their parents missed important events in their lives. Their parents also tended to report more involvement in the children's school and extracurricular activities.

The responses of single parents clearly reflected the strain of being their children's sole source of financial, emotional, and social support — responsibilities typically shared in two-parent families. Nevertheless, they and their children reported close parent-child relationships — a useful reminder that the limitations of time and money and the absence of a second parent may more often be the cause of children's disadvantage than any personal shortcomings of the single parent.

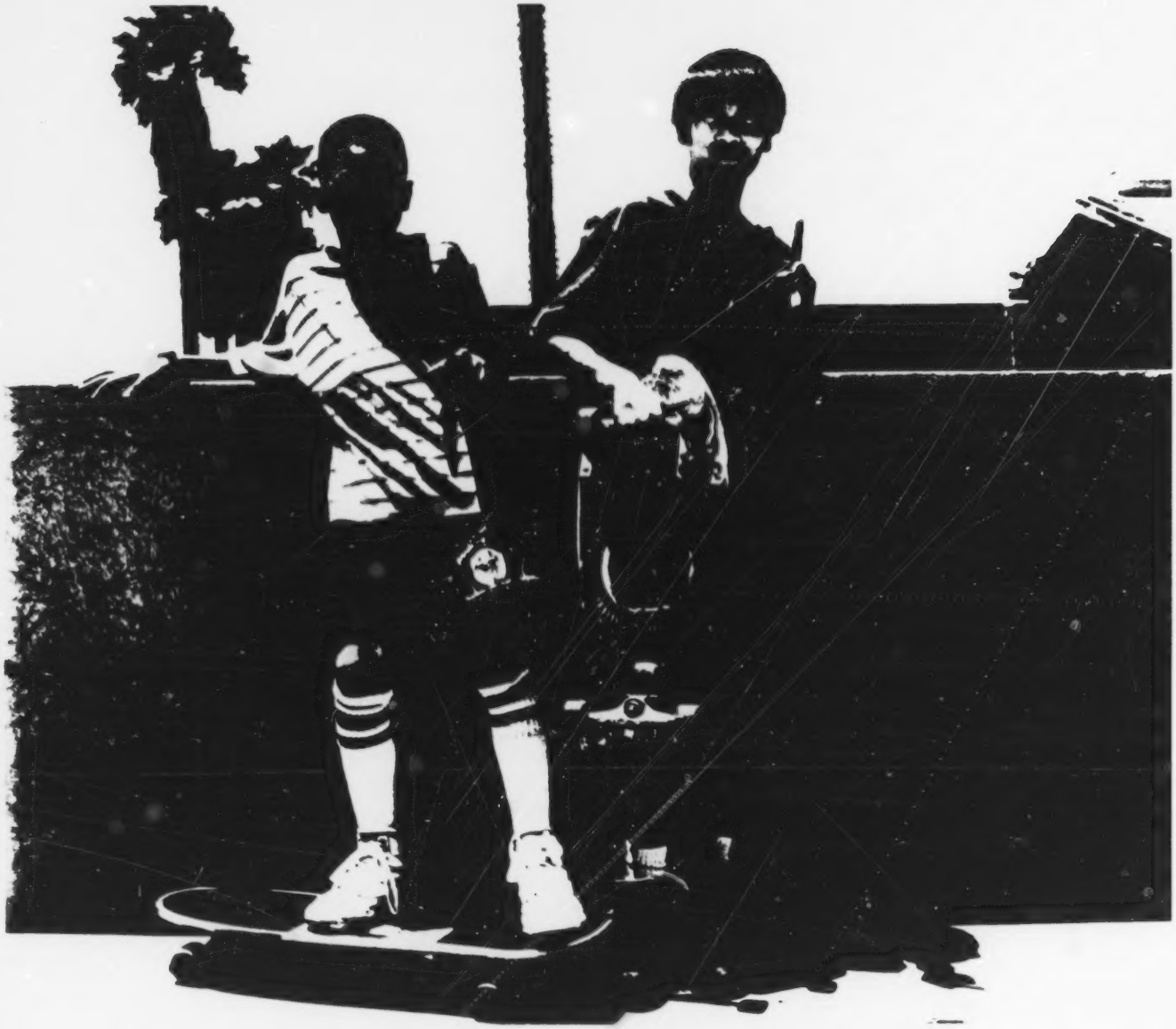
Parents who do not live with their children obviously vary in the extent to which they are involved in their children's day-to-day lives. Some routinely pay child support and maintain regular, frequent, and close contact with their children. Not surprisingly, their children's responses to survey questions reflected considerable affection and respect. On the other hand, absent parents, typically fathers, who neither visit nor pay child support surface in the Commission's surveys as the weak link in contemporary family life. At the very least, their failure to provide financial support to their children creates enormous stress for the other parent and for the children. But the Commission's surveys also describe the emotional price some children pay when they have an absent parent. Children need the consistent presence of close, caring adults in their lives. Sporadic visits — and in some cases the complete absence of a parent — deprive children of a valuable relationship that can be important to their emotional well-being.

The tremendous adjustments most children face when their parents divorce can contribute to emotional problems, including depression, trouble getting along with parents or peers, misbehavior stemming from anger, and declining school performance.[2] While more recent research suggests that some of these problems existed before divorce, perhaps as a result of family or marital discord leading to divorce,[3] the conclusion remains that stressful and discordant home lives are damaging for children. While the formation of a stepfamily generally improves a child's economic situation, it does not necessarily resolve other problems and may in many cases create or exacerbate emotional problems for children facing a fundamental change in their lives.

Children and parents need time together to strengthen the mutual emotional bonds that are the foundation of human development and relationships. Yet many parents responding to the surveys revealed concern and perhaps anxiety that they did not have sufficient time to spend with their children. This was

as true for parents of young children as for those of older children. Work outside the home is the chief reason for limitations on parents' time. Increasingly, employed mothers and fathers are torn between their responsibility to provide for their children's material needs and their responsibility to meet their children's emotional needs.

It seems unlikely that parents' patterns of work will change dramatically in coming years. Rather, innovative policies and practices by some employers, model contracts negotiated by business and labor, and state and local statutes mandating family and medical leave suggest that employers, employees, and government will increasingly seek out ways to accommodate working parents' concerns for their children's well-being.



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Throughout the survey findings, there were indications of parental stress, brought about by concerns over finances, safety, and time, and in some cases attributable to social isolation. This last factor was most evident in the extreme levels of fear and concern for children's safety expressed by Hispanic parents, many of whom appear to be recent immigrants and may feel adrift in a new and confusing culture. But it is also evident in the limited sources of social support available to parents in poor, urban communities, as well as to parents of all incomes whose adolescents have many friends engaged in high-risk activities. Responses from children and parents in stepfamilies suggest that they, too, might benefit from additional social support as they adapt to new family relationships.

In communities across the country, family support programs have developed to combat isolation, encourage parents to support one another through peer groups and community activities, provide important information for families seeking assistance for a range of problems, and offer advice and guidance on childrearing. In recent years, these programs have attracted the attention of state policymakers looking for ways to strengthen families and promote child development. Though family support programs are relatively new, a growing body of program research suggests that they contribute to stronger parent-child relationships and to better social adjustment and school performance by children.[4]

Taken together, the surveys' findings about family structure and children's well-being illustrate the need to encourage the formation of strong, stable families as the best environment for raising children, to help families experiencing problems stay together whenever possible, and to provide support to all families struggling with isolation or the need to balance work and family responsibilities. Accordingly, ***the National Commission on Children offered the following recommendations in its final report:***

- ***that individuals and society reaffirm their commitment to forming and supporting strong, stable families as the best environment for raising children;***[5]
- ***that both parents share responsibility for planning their families and delaying pregnancy until they are financially and emotionally capable of assuming the obligations of parenthood. Although decisions concerning family planning are and should continue to remain a private matter, public support for family planning services should be sustained to ensure that all families, regardless of income, can plan responsibly for parenthood;***[6]
- ***that government and all private sector employers establish family-oriented policies and practices — including family and medical leave policies, flexible work scheduling alternatives, and career sequencing — to enable employed mothers and fathers to meet their work and family responsibilities;***[7] ***and***
- ***that federal, state, and local governments, in partnership with private community organizations, develop and expand community-based family support programs to provide parents with the knowledge, skills, and support they need to raise their children.***[8]

Ensuring Income Security

Even the strongest marriages and the most dedicated parents may falter in the face of economic hardship. Indeed, many of the pressures and worries cited by parents in the Commission's surveys are related to concerns about money. For many families, long hours at work and away from children are the only way to make ends meet. Dissatisfaction with one's neighborhood as a place to raise children may reflect a family's inability to afford housing in a safer or more desirable community. At least some of the stress felt by single parents stems from the economic and time pressures that often result when one parent must bear the financial responsibilities of two.

While economic security is a major concern of middle-income families, it is a constant source of anxiety for low-income parents. As the surveys indicate, more than half of poor parents report that they worry all the time that they will be unable to meet their families' basic needs. They are also more likely to believe their neighborhoods are unsafe or inhospitable places for children. Not surprisingly, poor parents also tend to worry more than other parents about the threats posed to their children by violence, reckless behavior, and the lure of the streets. When poor families live in urban settings, these fears intensify.

Poor parents are right to worry. Research indicates that children growing up in poverty, especially in dangerous environments, suffer the most health and behavioral problems. As the National Commission on Children stated in its final report, poor children:

> have lower levels of literacy and higher rates of school dropout. They experience more hunger, homelessness, and violence. They are more often removed from their parents' care because of abuse or neglect. Disproportionately, they lack the necessary skills and knowledge to get good jobs, and they have fewer job opportunities. If they live in families headed by a single mother or in families dependent on welfare, they will more likely than not repeat the pattern of their parents' lives and continue the cycle of poverty when they reach adulthood.[9]

Whether they are poor because of parents' behavior and attitudes or because of economic and social forces beyond parents' control, children are still the victims and often pay a lifelong price.

Today, children are the poorest Americans.[10] Children living only with their mothers are especially likely to be poor. Nationwide, more than 40 percent of families headed by mothers were poor, compared to about 7 percent of two-parent families.[11] Continued high rates of divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing increase significantly the chances that an American child will be poor and will spend a greater portion of his or her childhood in poverty. Poverty among single-parent families generally persists over many years, regardless of changes in the economy. In contrast, poverty among two-parent families tends to fluctuate with the economy.[12]

To reduce the incidence of childhood poverty and to increase the economic security of all families raising children, the National Commission on Children proposed a comprehensive income support plan based on fundamental American principles of work, family, and independence. Its goals are to:

- increase parents' capacity to meet their children's material needs;
- allow families greater freedom to make basic decisions about how they live their lives and raise their children;
- make work more attractive than long-term receipt of welfare;
- ensure that the nation's income support and tax policies do not discourage family formation or undermine family stability; and
- ensure that absent parents meet their financial responsibilities to their children.

With these goals in mind, ***the National Commission on Children offered the following recommendations:***

- ***a $1,000 refundable child tax credit for all children through age 18 and elimination of the personal exemption for dependent children to partially offset the costs;***[13]
- ***the Earned Income Tax Credit, as recently expanded, to encourage low-income parents to enter the paid work force and strive for economic independence;***[14]
- ***an insured child support plan (tested first with a demonstration project of suitable scale) that would combine enhanced child support enforcement with a government-insured benefit when absent parents do not meet their support obligations;***[15]
- ***the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills Training Program (JOBS) and the provision of transitional supports and services to low-income parents moving from welfare to work;***[16] ***and***
- ***community employment opportunities provided by states and localities, where appropriate and feasible, for parents who are able and willing to work but cannot find a job on their own.***[17]

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Supporting the Transition to Adulthood

Children need support and guidance from parents and other caring adults at every stage of development. The Commission's surveys sketched a disturbing picture of the risks facing adolescents who fail to receive the adult supervision and attention they need. Substantial percentages of young people of every income, locale, and family type indicated that at least some of their friends engaged in high-risk activities, including substance abuse, premature sexual activity, and delinquent or criminal conduct. Because adolescents are particularly susceptible to peer pressure and the influence of friends and acquaintances, these findings highlight young people's need for careful, consistent, and mature guidance as they make the sometimes difficult passage from childhood to adulthood.

A growing body of literature has sought to identify the characteristics of strong families. Among the most important is clear, open, and frequent communication between parents and children.[18] Unfortunately, among the young people surveyed, those who indicated the largest numbers of friends involved in high-risk activities were also the least likely to report close and supportive relationships with their parents. Many of their parents, in turn, appeared either indifferent to their children's activities and associations or lacking the ability and support to deal effectively with potentially harmful influences in their children's lives.

Best available estimates suggest that one in four American adolescents engages in conduct that places him or her at moderate risk of harm and long-term problems. Another quarter of adolescents engage in multiple high-risk activities that seriously threaten their own health and well-being and that of others. Most of these young people have fallen behind in school, and some have already dropped out. Many engage in unprotected sexual activity that can (and often does) lead to pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases. Some have committed serious offenses that can (and often do) result in arrest. Many are heavy users of drugs and alcohol.[19]

Emerging knowledge based on studies of very different populations around the world identifies several "protective factors" that can help children in adverse circumstances avoid long-term harm and dysfunction.[20] Among them are parents who are stable and sensitive caregivers, able to establish structure and order in their homes, and thus to encourage children's self-esteem and shield them from at least some of the stresses in their lives.[21] Other adults who foster trust in children and encourage them to set and pursue goals for the future are another important

protective factor, especially for children whose parents are absent or unable to provide close and nurturing relationships. Grandparents, mentors, youth leaders, teachers, and members of their religious community who accept children unconditionally can help shield them from stress and disorder at home.[22] Finally, for many vulnerable children and young people, a "second chance" — through work, education, or active involvement in a religious community — can be the critical factor that helps them recognize their own efficacy and overcome past adversity.[23]

Based on this knowledge, ***the National Commission on Children offered recommendations to prevent high risk behavior among those adolescents at low and moderate risk of problems, as well as help those youngsters already experiencing severe problems cope with the consequences and make their way back to the mainstream. Among these recommendations:***

- ***Individual adults, communities, and the public and private sectors should take aggressive steps to ensure that all young people have access to a broad array of supports in their communities to promote healthy adolescent development and help them avoid high-risk behaviors that jeopardize their futures.*** These supports begin with close and careful parental monitoring, and include mentoring and other opportunities for caring adults to work one-on-one with young people. They further include a wide range of community-based services, programs, and activities for young people, including tutoring, drug and alcohol prevention and treatment programs, family life programs, comprehensive health services, and opportunities for recreation and cultural enrichment.[24]
- ***Parents, schools, employers, and government should initiate or expand efforts to introduce young people to employment and career options; to help them acquire the skills, knowledge, and experience for their chosen fields; and to link more closely the worlds of school and work.***[25]
- ***Communities should create and expand opportunities for community service by young people.*** Feeling helpful and needed are important protective factors for young people who might otherwise have difficulty growing into responsible adults. Adolescent development is enhanced when young people can assume meaningful roles and responsibilities in their communities and contribute directly to the well-being of others.[26]

Creating a Moral Climate for Children

The Commission's surveys raised issues related to children's moral development. Responses to these questions were somewhat mixed. On the one hand, the surveys revealed substantial parental guidance, oversight, and example. Children reported that their parents frequently discuss values and religion with them, as well as issues of personal conduct such as drug and alcohol use, sexual behavior, and relationships with friends. Most parents indicated close monitoring of their children's activities and expressed considerable confidence in their ability to dissuade their children from harmful, dangerous, or exploitative conduct. Involvement by families in religious communities also appeared fairly high. Most parents described themselves as somewhat or very religious and claimed an affiliation with a religious denomination. A majority of parents reported that their families attended religious services at least monthly, and many of these reported at least weekly attendance. On the other hand, there were several indications in the surveys that children wanted or needed more guidance and direction. Almost 4 in 10 children reported that they "sometimes" wished their parents were more strict or attentive (a much smaller percentage indicated that they wished this "a lot"). Large percentages of adolescents reported having friends who engaged in risky behaviors. As children got older,

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their interest in discussing personal conduct and values with their parents diminished. Public concern over the potentially corrosive effects of popular culture — particularly as transmitted through movies, music, television, and advertising — identifies another powerful force influencing children's moral development. Taken together, these factors underscore the importance — and perhaps also the challenge — of providing steady and consistent moral guidance to children and adolescents.

The pervasive influence of popular culture, the considerable time that children spend apart from their parents every day, and the diversity of American society suggest strongly that parents cannot bear sole responsibility for creating a moral climate for children. While parents must take the lead in their children's moral development, the critical task of ensuring that children receive strong and consistent messages about society's shared values also belongs to others in the community and to leaders in the public and private sectors.

The National Commission on Children therefore offered the following recommendations:

- ***Parents should be more vigilant and aggressive guardians of their children's moral development, monitoring the values to which their children are exposed, discussing conflicting messages with their children, and, if necessary, limiting or precluding their children's exposure to images parents consider offensive.***[27]
- ***Television producers should exercise greater restraint in the content of programming for children, and television stations should exercise restraint in the amount and type of advertising aired during children's programs.***[28]
- ***Communities should create opportunities for voluntary service by children and adults and should recognize the contributions of volunteers that better the community and assist its members.***[29]
- ***All Americans should renew their personal commitment to the common good and demonstrate this commitment by giving highest priority to personal actions and public policies that promote the health and well-being of the nation's children.***[30]

Conclusion

The recommendations mentioned above are some, but not all, of those offered by the National Commission on Children. In addition to addressing issues raised by the surveys, the Commission's final report made proposals in the areas of health care, education, child welfare, and the performance of public programs serving children and families.[c] Throughout its work, the Commission gave special attention to its members' deep conviction that families and the circumstances of their lives are the most critical factor affecting children's welfare. As these surveys indicate, many families have tremendous internal resources, but many also face considerable challenges. Recognizing this, the Commission's recommendations aim to build on families' strengths and mitigate the factors that weaken families and harm children. In the months and years to come, it is the Commission's fervent hope that its agenda will also become the nation's agenda.

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[c]Copies of the final report, **Beyond Rhetoric: A New American Agenda for Children and Families**, are available from the National Commission on Children, 1111 18th St., N.W., Suite 810, Washington, D.C. 20036, or the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402.

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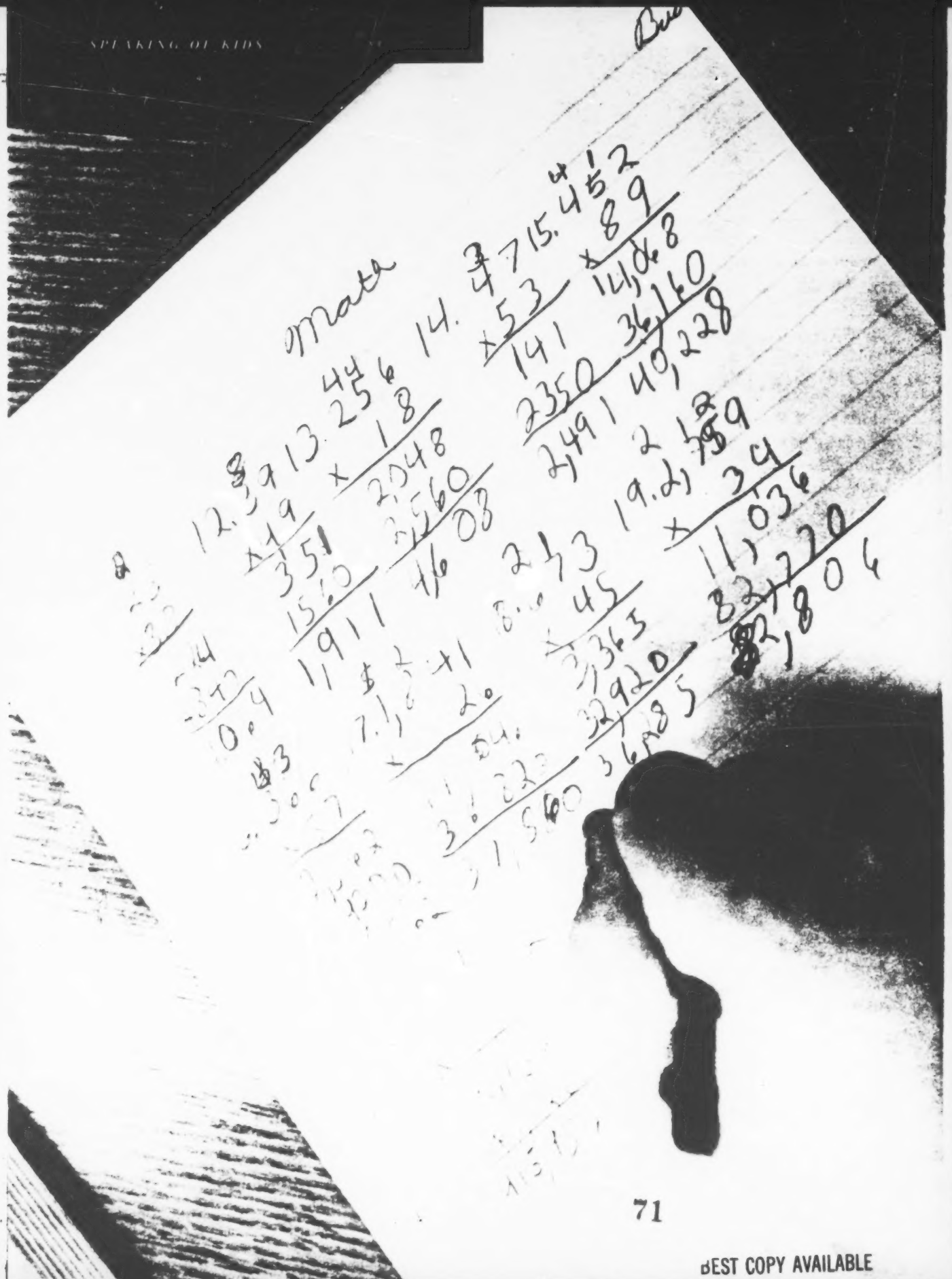

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Appendix A
Survey Methodology

General Social Survey

The General Social Survey (GSS) has been conducted every year by NORC, the National Opinion Research Center, affiliated with the University of Chicago. James A. Davis and Tom W. Smith are the principal investigators. The survey is representative of the total non-institutionalized English-speaking population of the United States age 18 and older. Its primary purpose is to provide data to facilitate the study of social trends. A second objective is to provide current high-quality data to scholars and analysts across the country.

The GSS is a face-to-face interview generally lasting about an hour and a half. It is conducted among a random sample of adults in their homes by trained interviewers between February and April of each year.

Three types of items are included in the GSS: permanent questions that are repeated identically on each survey; rotating questions that are posed to two-thirds of the respondents every year; and occasional questions or modules of questions that are included in only one year. Survey content generally covers a variety of topics, ranging from income, social activities, ecology, religion, race relations, and family life.

Occasional questions and topical modules are often added by outside groups to supplement the standard core of items asked every year and analyzed either separately or in conjunction with other data collected in the survey. This was the procedure employed in collecting data for the National Commission on Children. Working closely with NORC staff, Commission members and staff developed approximately 4 minutes of questions, consisting of four multi-part questions, which were added to the face-to-face portion of the 1990 GSS. The Commission also added a multi-part question to a short self-administered questionnaire that follows the face-to-face interview.

The 1990 GSS interview was conducted among 1,372 respondents in all geographic regions and in both urban and rural areas. Respondents included parents with minor children, parents with adult children, and childless adults. The overall response rate for the 1990 GSS was 74 percent. All data were weighted to be representative of the U.S. population.

Data from all General Social Surveys, including the data collected for the National Commission on Children, are available for secondary analysis from:

The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research
P.O. Box 440
Storrs, Connecticut 06268
(203) 486-4440

Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research
P.O. Box 1248
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106-1248
(313) 764-2570

Survey of Children and Parents

The 1990 survey of children and parents by the National Commission on Children was a national telephone interview opinion survey of 1,738 parents in the continental United States who live with their children. Interviews were also conducted with 929 of the children age 10 to 17 living in these households. The sample of parents included 709 parents of non-black, non-Hispanic children; 483 parents of black, non-Hispanic children; and 546 parents of Hispanic children. The distribution of interviews with children age 10 to 17 consists of 387 non-black, non-Hispanic children; 259 black, non-Hispanic children and 283 Hispanic children. In order to obtain sufficiently large numbers of black and Hispanic children and children age 10 to 17, these groups were oversampled.[1]

The study was designed by staff of the National Commission on Children with significant input from Commission members, in collaboration with Kristin Moore, Ph.D. and Ellen Wolpow Smith of Child Trends, Inc., and Diane Colasanto, Ph.D. of Princeton Survey Research Associates (PSRA), Princeton, New Jersey. A distinguished group of scholars of child development and child and family issues also assisted the staff and consultants in the design of the survey. PSRA managed and supervised the design of the questionnaire, pretesting, sampling, data collection, and statistical analysis. Interviewing services were provided by DataStat, Inc., Ann Arbor, Michigan. Interviews were conducted from September 17 through November 23, 1990.

Because the sample population included children as young as age 10, extensive pretesting of the survey questionnaires took place. The final questionnaire appeared to work well; both young children and adults understood the questions and generally found the subject matter interesting. There were few break-offs in the middle of an interview. Overall response rates (discussed below) were quite high, as were the response rates on individual items (such as questions about income) that typically have low response rates.

[1] Oversampling is a strategy commonly employed in large surveys when researchers want to be able to analyze the data separately for relatively small subgroups. If the number of cases that would be obtained by randomly sampling households would be too small to support separate analyses for subgroups, these subgroups can be oversampled: a higher proportion of these types of households can purposefully be selected into the sample. In the case of this survey, the number of Hispanic respondents is approximately four times as large as would be expected by chance, while the number of black respondents is two-and-one-half times as large. All data for the total sample are weighted down to represent the true proportion of Hispanics and blacks in the sample.

Sample Design. The sample of telephone numbers was selected by Survey Sampling, Inc., Fairfield, Connecticut, following PSRA's specifications. The sample was selected in three parts: a national sample of random-digit telephone numbers designed to produce a representative sample of the general population, a national sample of random-digit and listed telephone numbers designed to produce a representative sample of the black population living in areas with significant black population, and a national sample of random-digit and listed telephone numbers designed to produce a representative sample of the population with Hispanic surnames.

The general population sample was a random digit sample of telephone numbers selected from telephone exchanges in the continental United States. The telephone exchanges were selected with probabilities proportional to their size. The first eight digits of the sampled telephone numbers (area code, telephone exchange, bank number) were selected to be proportionally stratified by county and by telephone exchange within county. That is, the number of telephone numbers randomly sampled from within a given county was proportional to that county's share of households with telephones in the state. Estimates of the number of telephone households within each county were derived from 1980 Census data on residential telephone incidence that had been updated with state information on new telephone installations and county projections of the number of households.

For the black supplemental sample, telephone numbers were selected at random from listed telephone numbers of households in census tracts that were at least 30 percent black in the 1980 Census. The random component of the black sample was constructed by adding "1" to listed telephone numbers that were selected in the same way as numbers selected for the listed component. Persons whose telephone numbers were selected were screened to confirm their race.

For the Hispanic supplemental sample, telephone numbers were selected at random from listed telephone numbers of households where the owner of the telephone has one of the over 11,000 surnames identified by the U.S. Census Bureau as "Hispanic." The random component of the Hispanic sample was constructed by adding "1" to listed telephone numbers selected in the same way as numbers selected for the listed component. Persons whose telephone numbers were selected were screened to confirm their ethnic background.

As a result of the design, the sampling procedures for the supplemental samples underrepresents blacks living in geographic areas that do not contain high concentrations of blacks, Hispanics who do not have Hispanic surnames, and members of both groups living in households with unlisted telephone numbers. The demographic weighting procedures described below mitigate, to a large degree, these limitations of the sample design.

At least five attempts were made to complete a screening interview at every sampled telephone number. The calls were staggered over times of day and days of the week to maximize the chances of making an initial con-

tact with a respondent. After completion of the screening interview, up to five additional calls were made to attempt to complete an interview with a parent, and up to five more calls were made to attempt to complete an interview with a child. Thus, 15 calls could have been made to a household with both a parent and a child eligible for interview. In addition, all persons refusing or breaking off an interview were recontacted at least once in an attempt to convince them to complete the interview. Interviews were conducted in Spanish, if that was the respondent's preference (175 parents and 29 children chose the Spanish interview).

In each contacted household, screening questions were asked to determine the number of children in various age groups, and a random selection of a "target child" was made from all the children age 17 and younger in the household. The target child then became the focus of the parental interview, and most of the questions in the parent's questionnaire referred to this child. If the target child was 10 or older, attempts were made to complete an interview with the child as well (see Table 1).

Table 1

	General Population	Black Oversample	Hispanic Oversample
Completed interviews			
with parents	881	460	397
with children	(464)	(248)	(217)
Incomplete interviews			
with parents	99	70	39
with children	(25)	(24)	(8)
Unable to interview child	(78)	(35)	(32)
Sample child under 10	(314)	(153)	(140)
Age quota filled	510	324	298
Ineligible by race/ethnicity	478	241	
Ineligible - no children	3,399	3,628	1,609
Unable to interview			
(illness, language, etc.)	120	115	76
Refusals	903	678	408
Maximum calls (contact			
established	34	26	30
Maximum calls (no contact			
ever made)	979	680	606
Business numbers	590	368	243
Non-working numbers	2,339	2,310	1,011
TOTAL NUMBERS USED	9,854	9,137	4,958

For purposes of this study, a parent respondent was defined as a residential biological parent, adoptive parent, stepparent, foster parent, or guardian. A guardian might be either a legal guardian or a "de facto" guardian, such as a grandparent who is raising the child and is responsible for the child on a day-to-day basis. If the household contained both a male and a female parent for the randomly selected child, a random process was used to select a parent to interview.

Different response rates can be calculated, depending on how telephone numbers that received maximum calls without a contact are classified. A conservative estimate of the response rate uses the assumption that *all* telephone numbers with maximum calls and no contact are functional, residential numbers, while a liberal estimate assumes that *none* of these numbers is a working, residential number. Truth is probably somewhere in between; therefore, an average of the liberal and conservative estimates was deemed an appropriate estimate of the final response rate for the study.

The overall response rate calculated in Table 2 is the product of three separate rates: the contact rate (proportion of working, residential telephone numbers where a contact with a person was made), the cooperation rate (proportion of contacted households where screening information could be obtained), and the completion rate (proportion of eligible households where an interview was completed). For purposes of this calculation, respondents who were unable to be interviewed due to illness, vacation, language problem (other than Spanish), or other such circumstances are considered to be ineligible.

Table 2

	General Oversample	Black Oversample	Hispanic Oversample
Contact rate (both conservative and liberal estimates)	85% to 99%	89% to 99%	83% to 99%
Cooperation rate	85%	88%	87%
Completion rate	90%	87%	91%
Conservative response rate	65%	68%	66%
Liberal response rate	76%	76%	78%
Average response rate	70%	72%	72%

Our best estimate for the response rate for parents is 71 percent. The parent interview contained questions concerning a specific child in the household, randomly selected. If this child was age 10 or older, an interview was attempted with the child after the parent interview was completed. In a few cases the parent refused permission for the child to be interviewed; in other cases the child refused the interview; in still other cases the child could not be reached at a convenient time to complete the interview during the field period. Taking all these instances of nonresponse into consideration, the response rates for completing the child interviews, given that a parent interview had been completed, are 82 percent for children reached as part of the general population sample, 81 percent for children reached as part of the black oversample, and 84 percent for children reached as part of the Hispanic oversample.

Weighting. Nonresponse in telephone interview surveys produces some known biases in survey-derived estimates because participation tends to vary among different subgroups of the population and these subgroups are like-

ly to vary also on questions of substantive interest. For example, young men are more difficult than other adults to reach at home by telephone, and people with relatively low educational attainment are less likely than others to agree to participate in telephone surveys. If their experiences and attitudes differ as well, this can introduce bias.

A more important source of potential bias in this survey is the explicit oversampling that was done to increase the representation of households with children age 10 to 17 and households with black and Hispanic children. In order to compensate for all of these known biases, the sample data for this survey were weighted in analysis.

The demographic weighting parameters for this study were derived from a special analysis of the most recently available Census Bureau Annual Demographic File (the March 1989 Current Population Survey). This analysis produced population parameters for the demographic characteristics of households with children, for parents living with children, and for children; these parameters were compared with the sample characteristics to construct sample weights. In this analysis, only households in the continental United States which had a telephone were included, to make the sample used to develop weights comparable to the survey sample. Population parameters were calculated from the Annual Demographic File:

- regional distribution of households with children,
- home ownership status of households with children,
- number of children age 17 or younger in households with children,
- presence or absence of children age 0-9, 10-13, and 14-17 in households with children,
- age distribution for children,
- joint distribution of child sex by race or ethnic background, and
- joint distribution of parent age by sex.

The weights were derived using an iterative technique that simultaneously balances the distributions of all weighting parameters. Two weights were calculated: a weight for parents that is based on all 10 weighting parameters, and a weight for children that is based on the four child-specific parameters and region only. After an optimum sample balancing solution was reached, the weights were constrained to fall within the range of 1 to 5 for nonblack, non-Hispanic children and their parents, within the range of 1 to 10 for the other parents, within the range of 1 to 6.67 for black children, and within the range of 1 to 6 for Hispanic children. This constraint is useful to ensure that individual respondents do not exert an inordinate effect on the survey's overall results.

In a final step, the parent weights were multiplied by a constant so that the total weighted sample size for parents would be approximately equal to the actual number of parents (in thousands) who live with their children in telephone households in the continental United States. The Annual

Demographic File estimate for the size of this population is 56,478,650. Similarly, the weights for children were multiplied by a constant so that the total weighted sample size for children would be approximately equal to the actual number of children (in thousands) who live in telephone households in the continental United States. The Annual Demographic File estimate for the number of children is 58,357,306.

Table 3 shows the unweighted sample distributions from this study, the weighted sample distributions, and the Census Bureau parameters separately for the three subsamples of parents and children.

Table 3

Non-Black, Non-Hispanic Children

	Unweighted Sample	Weighted Sample	March 1989 CPS
Parent's Sex			
Male	42	45	46
Female	58	55	54
Parent's Age under 30	13	18	19
30 to 39	46	46	45
40 to 49	35	28	28
50 to older	6	7	8
Parent's Education			
Less than HS graduate	8	12	13
High school graduate	38	42	43
Some college	24	21	20
College graduate	29	26	25
Parent's Marital Status			
Married	82	88	89
Not Married	18	12	11
Sex			
Boy	50	51	51
Girl	50	49	49
Age			
0-3	15	22	23
4-5	6	10	11
6-9	13	23	23
10-13	32	22	21
14-17	34	23	22

The differences between the unweighted distribution and the target distribution for age of parent and age of child can be attributed to the disproportionate sample design which included households with a child age 10 and older at a greater rate than households with younger children. On the other hand, the difference between the unweighted distribution and the target distribution for parent education is probably due to systematic nonresponse. These differences on education are small, except among Hispanics, where respondents with less than a high school education are underrepresented to a greater extent. This may be due to some reluctance to participate on the part of non-English speakers, despite being offered the

opportunity to have the interview conducted in Spanish. Of the parents interviewed in Spanish, 75 percent had not completed high school.

Fathers and married parents are both underrepresented in the unweighted survey data for all three samples, especially among blacks. Married mothers and married fathers are underrepresented to similar degrees, except among nonblack, non-Hispanic parents, where only married mothers are underrepresented (data not shown).

It is difficult to completely account for this degree of underrepresentation, but three explanations seem plausible. First, in all surveys it is difficult to locate men, particularly black men, at home at a convenient time to schedule a telephone interview. In this survey, such tendencies may have been exacerbated by feelings on the part of some randomly selected fathers that their wives would be more appropriate respondents for this particular interview. Second, single parents may have had a greater motivation than married parents to participate in the survey, since they might have seen it as an opportunity to talk about the special pressures that they feel raising their children alone. Third, the fact that the minority oversamples were skewed toward geographic areas with high concentrations of minority residents may have caused single-parent households to become overrepresented in the survey data. As noted, weighting the data to conform to the national population distribution helps to make the data representative.

Statistical Tests. For results based on the total sample of parents, one can say with 95 percent confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects is plus or minus 3 percentage points. For results based on the total sample of children, one can say with 95 percent confidence that the error attributable to sampling and other random effects is plus or minus 3 percentage points. For smaller subgroups, larger differences are necessary to reach statistical significance. To conclude that differences between nonblack, non-Hispanic children and black children are statistically significant at the 95 percent level of confidence, for example, we would generally need to observe an 11 percentage point difference between these groups of children.

Availability of the Data. Data collected for the National Commission on Children's survey of parents and children can be obtained from any of the following data archives:

Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research
P.O. Box 1248
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106-1248
(313) 764-2570

Roper Center for Public Opinion Research
P.O. Box 440
Storrs, Connecticut 06268
(203) 486-4440

Sociometrics Corporation
170 State Street, Suite 260
Los Altos, California 94022-2812
(415) 949-3282

Appendix B
Technical Advisory Panel

The National Commission on Children gratefully acknowledges the the following individuals, who provided valuable advice and assistance in the conceptualization and design of its surveys and in the analysis of the resulting data:

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